

[Lecture 5]
What Authority has Experience Over a Man's Religious Life?
[Early Modern Period,
Methodism, George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley]

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This is the great question which the Methodist movement of the 18th century in England, and the Great Awakening in this country, asked of the religious mind.

I venture, at the risk of repetition, to state the general conditions in which the religious life of England was at the time when this great revival swept over the country beginning in 1736. There are at least three points which must be remembered in arriving at any comprehension of the significance of the revival. (1) We must remember that the Puritan movement had been successful in establishing the Bible, the inspired Revelation of God, as the final authority of the religious life. In the Protestant movement, the Bible was to be the Oracle of Wisdom and divine power instead of the Catholic Church. According to its words of wisdom were all things to be decided. It was the source of Divine Truth. But (2) we must remember that as a matter of fact, the real authority was not the Bible, but John Calvin's interpretation of the Bible, or to put it more plainly, John Calvin had made use of the Bible to support and defend his theological system, and this Calvinism had become the generally accepted theology of the Anglican Church. (3) We must remember that during the years of reaction after the feverish excitement of the Puritan movement, that religion interested no one, that all the fine, delicate sentiments of life were crushed beneath the general courseness and vulgarity of the times, and men regarded religion as a mere superstition. Absolute indifference to what we call the finer sentiments was the common thing. (4) In spite of this attempt to ruthlessly crush all interest in truth, goodness and beauty beneath the earth, and to destroy them by the grinding heel of passion, and brutality, the finer sides of life were coming

to the front again. The revival of Shakespeare's plays, new interest in music, the appearance of things literary, were witnesses to the dawn of a new day.

These are the four things which are to be born in mind as we trace the movement which resulted in Methodism. As I have said, people were in the habit of just existing, catching at some chance straw of pleasure, or excitement, drifting through life with no other end or aim than to get all the pleasure of excitement that might come to them. In 1709 Mrs. Wesley¹ wrote to her son at College, advising him "to throw his business into some method." "Often put this question to yourself: Why do I do this or that? By which means you will come to such a steadiness and consistency as becomes a reasonable creature and a good citizen."

It is probably as a result of this motherly advice that amid the loose helter-skelter university life of that day, a few serious-minded youths came together into a little society "which endeavored to act upon principle."

These chaps became famous in their university world, and the natural bantering and buffoonery which fell upon them from less serious students tended to isolate them of general life. It may be that they went to extremes of religious piety, and self-examination in their attempts to answer the question which had been given them, "Why do I do this?" But the fact remains that in the hands of these students was placed the task of lifting from the low ethical, religious, and moral condition in which she was, while John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield were preparing for orders in the English Church. These are the three men about whom the interest centers. Of the three, I suppose that we must regard Whitefield as the real fountainhead of the revival. He is an interesting character. Born in 1714. Entered Oxford, and was ordained June 20th 1736 at Gloucester. During this period he went through the dark gloom of despondency which severe introspection brings on. He became converted, and began a thorough study of the Bible. "About this time," he says, "God was pleased to enlighten my soul, and bring me into

¹ Susanna Wesley, nee Annesley, (1669-1742), John Wesley's (1703-1791) mother.

the knowledge of his free grace—and the necessity of being justified in his sight by faith only."²

In August 1736 he preached his first sermon. This and others to follow were of great significance. He soon {???) to for a missionary turn. Took priest's orders in 1739 upon his return from Georgia. Then began the great revival which like wild fire spread over England. His few months of service in England before his visit to Georgia, had given him something of a reputation. Consequently when he began his preaching in the winter of 1738 and 9 he found many pulpits closed against him. In spite of this he preached wherever a pulpit was open to him. But at last there was no pulpit open to him and he began to preach everywhere regardless of places, or people on street corners, in fields, to congregations which numbered thousands. It is said that he was at times surrounded by 30,000 people who listened with such intensesness as to be of one mind. Conversions came by the thousands and excitement in the things of religion passed all comprehension. He reached the people of the lowest types, drunken, brutal beings, and under the power of the revival enthusiasm they were lifted to a noble religious life. He came to this country and in 1740 he swept like a cyclone across up and down the states here, carrying all before him, and leaving behind wonder and amazement. I cannot relate to you the great story of this period. It is wild, exciting and thrilling. For many years the flame of religion had been smoldering beneath the mass of rubbish and now Whitefield had struck the spark that set the whole mass into one flame, and the religious fire burned brightly.

At this point the genius of John Wesley comes in, and through his efforts together with Whitefield and others, these converts were organized into classes for study and teaching. Prayer meetings were held, and every possible channel was made up of for directing the tremendous enthusiasm into good living. Itinerant and lay preachers were employed and the Methodist societies, under their hands, and, subject to the overpowering personality of John

² Robert Philip, *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield*, London: George Virtue, 1837, p. 28. Underlining added by Earl Davis.

Wesley, became organized and soon began to meet in conventions. In the course of time the movement developed into the various Methodist Denominations.

But there are a few points that we must remember in connection with this great revival which ushered in the spring and summer after the long winter of religious indifference.

In the first place, it was not a separatist movement. Whitefield and both of the Wesleys were strong supporters of the Church of England. They always remained true to its forms, and died within its limits. In spite of the fact that they were excluded from preaching in its pulpits and were persecuted by its preachers, and ignored and ridiculed by its whole body, they remained true to its cause, and allowing the ridicule to fall from their heads, still declared their allegiance.

But in spite of every attempt on the part of the English Church to exclude the Methodists [from] their ranks; denying them the rights of communion, put every possible obstacle in the way of their attending services, the body of Methodists still clung to their allegiance to the Church. They never held meetings of their own at a time when services were being conducted in the established churches. The Methodist leaders urged and exhorted their followers to attend services in the Established Church, even when they had to do so in the face of insult and persecution. During the lifetime of the starters of the movement this attitude was still maintained, and to this day I believe there has been no formal act recognizing the separation of the two bodies.

In the second place, this great revival was no respecter of persons. The Anglican Church was then, as it is now, essentially the Church of the better classes. Whitefield and Wesley did not recognize such distinctions. They preached their message unto whoever they might reach, whether it be to the nobility, or to the workers in the coal mines, the most downtrodden of the outcasts. Of these two men, Wesley was the most democratic in spirit, while Whitefield became more closely associated with the aristocratic converts. This was a rock upon which the unity

of the movement was wrecked. Whitefield and his aristocratic followers became the Calvinistic Methodists. Wesley and his followers from among the middle and lower classes became the Wesleyan Methodists. The Whitefield following, after the conflict between the two leaders had separated, gradually died away. The whole movement was in fact a religious movement of the middle and lower classes. It was a rekindling of the old Puritan fire among the more humble people of the realm. In this fact is found the essential reason why the Methodists did not find a warm welcome before the alters of the English Church. For so persistently clinging to the Church, the Methodists are reproached by Bishop Gibson in the following words,

This new sect of Methodists have broken through all these provisions and restraints. ... They began with evening meetings in private houses, but they have been going on from time to time to open and appoint public places of religious worship with the same freedom as if they were warranted by the Act of Toleration. And not content with that, they have had the boldness to preach in the fields and other open places, and by public advertisement to invite the *rabble* to be their bearers. (Julia Wedgewood's *John Wesley*,³ page 302.)

That word "rabble" has the whole bone of contention in a nut shell. The whole essence of the attitude seems to have been as one has very pointedly said, "You shall not be allowed to belong to the Church," because they carried their message to the "Rabble."

But curiously enough, while this social aloofness was at the bottom of the rejection of the Methodists from the Anglican Church, the dispute was carried on upon a question of Doctrine. This is the third thing that we must remember. The Anglican Church was flying the flag of Calvinism. Of the fine stripes which made up the flag, the one of the Doctrine of Election was the particular object of interest. It throws much light upon the significance of religious

³ Julia Wedgewood, *John Wesley and the Evangelical Reaction of the Eighteenth Century*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1870. The word "rabble" was italicized in the original.

dogma to notice how closely allied these dogmas are with the dominant social ideals. Calvinism, with its doctrine of election of the few and the eternal damnation of the many, is merely a religious interpretation of the Monarchical form of government. To a people who are accustomed to seeing the great multitudes made use of for the sole purpose of paying homage and adding to the glory of a King and the few noble followers, Calvinism is perfectly natural, and as a matter of fact is simply the interpretation of man's relation to God in terms of the prevailing social standards. But the Methodist movement was based upon another idea, the idea of religious experience, the idea of the power of the believer to surrender himself to Christ, to be justified by faith in Christ. Perhaps one or two extracts from the minutes of the early conferences of these societies will make clear the general position. "All believers become children of Grace, reconciled to God, and made partakers of Divine nature."

Quest. 16 Minutes. Quest 1. "What is it to be justified?" A. "To be pardoned and received into God's favor into such a state, that if we continue therein we shall be finally saved."

Q 2 Is faith the condition of justification?
A. Yes: for everyone who believeth not is condemned, and everyone who believes is justified."

The essence of the thing seems to be this. That through Christ, God opens the way of salvation, man repents, believes, and is justified by faith, and in this justification is saved.

This idea was the great stimulus to the preaching activities, for by touching the sinner's heart so that he could repent, and believe would save him from the punishment.

I cannot explain further this doctrinal issue except to point out that it is the application to theological problems, the ideas which were gaining currency in English social life, viz. that man's power, influence and position in society did not rest alone upon his election to the aristocratic circles by virtue of his birth, but that he may enter into the realm of the aristocratic and

influential members of society by other methods. In short, the growth of these so-called Arminian ideas in theology are simply the theological applications of the more democratic habits and customs which were working their way into this new English life.

To summarize. (1) The Methodist movement was essentially middle class. (2) Its exclusion from the English Church rested upon class distinctions. (3) The theological discussion turned upon the Calvinistic doctrine of election.

But it must be remembered that the separation from the English Church did not take place until after the death of the Wesleys and Whitefield.

The movement was one of great [sic] apart from the fact of its numerical growth, and general moral and spiritual contributions to society and individuals.

In the opening conference, the 2nd question asked is this.

Q: How far does each one of us agree to submit to the judgement of the majority? Answer: "In speculative things, each can only submit so far as his judgement shall be convinced; in every practical point, each will submit so far as he can without wounding his conscience."

Q 3: Can a Christian submit any further than this to any man or number of men upon earth? A: "It is plain, he cannot, either to Bishop, Convocation, or general council."

And this is that general principle of private judgement, on which all the reforms proceeded. "Every man must judge for himself, because every man must give an account of himself to God."

You see [sic] is a very liberal and open door start-off. It is a pity that the right of private judgement has not been held to with more fidelity. But the truth is that while John Wesley was a man of such great power, his masterful influence had one bad effect, viz., the exactness with which he organized, made the exercise of this right of private judgment very difficult, but such a declaration even was very significant.

The emphasis upon the idea that religious conviction rests upon the personal experience was another great step. A man must see God to believe in him, that is, that religion is not a mechanism, not an institution, but a thing of personal experience, of personal relationship to God. To my mind this is a fundamental truth of the religious life, as it is of all life. The only way open for a man to know and realize the power and richness of the religious life, is to live, to give it trial, to prove its effectualness by direct experience. I cannot show a man what the religious life is. All I can do is to say, "Come and see for yourself."

To my mind the limitation of this doctrine of experience as expounded by the Wesleys and their followers is this. They limit its power to those within the folds of Christianity. Still relying upon the idea of the infallibility of the Bible, they held that this experience was possible only to those to whom it is offered by the atonement of Christ. There is one place in the minutes where they seem to show some doubts upon this point.

Question 6: But may not a man go to heaven with it (Faith in Christ)? Answer: "It does not appear from holy writ that a man who hears the gospel can, whatever a heathen may do."

But the way was not clear for them to take such a radical step, and the extreme care with which Wesley organized the following, has made it more difficult for the Methodist Denomination to do so since then. But we shall see how the admission of these two principles into the church, viz., the right of private judgement, and the authority of experience in religious life, raised the question of the infallibility of the Bible. If one has the right to judge for himself and bases his judgement upon personal experience, he cannot submit to the authority of any kind beyond a point where his conscience is involved. In the course of a few years, this authority of experience, and private judgement came face-to-face with the Bible, and in our next lecture one month from tonight we shall take up the loose end that we leave hanging here, and ask "What authority the Bible has over a man's religious life?"

But before leaving the subject tonight, I wish to point out its relation to the lecture next Sunday night. Wesley and Whitefield held that the fruits of this faith must be "Peace,

joy, love, power over all outward sin, and power to keep down inward sin." When we come to see the influence of social life which this great movement exerted, we shall discover that its power manifested itself in all directions, towards ameliorating the conditions of life in the English world which in our last lecture we found to be so depressing. The consideration of that aspect of the movement will be taken up next Sunday evening.