

The Inextinguishable Blaze: The Evangelical Revival in Great Britain

We have to—and we certainly want to—talk at some length in this lesson about the great English preacher, John Wesley. I would like to begin with a prayer from John Wesley, a very brief prayer, but a very meaningful one. Follow these words as I pray them. Let us pray:

“Pardon, O gracious Jesus, what we have been; with Your holy discipline correct what we are. Order by your providence what we shall be; and in the end, crown your own gifts. Amen.”

I want to talk first about the social and religious condition in England at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century. And I hope as I outline both the developments in the culture and in the church, we will remember that we are not all that far from the Puritan period. It comes as kind of a shock to realize that what I describe now in England came in just one or two generations after the great heroic period of the Puritans, and it shows that nothing stays around forever. The church can quickly decline into worldliness and unbelief as it did in England in the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was a time of social chaos in the country, and I suppose one of the best ways to illustrate that is just to take a look at some of the pictures of William Hogarth, who painted the depravity and sinfulness of culture in a very dramatic way. His pictures have names like “Gin Lane” and “Beer Street,” and he depicts human emotions distorted and deformed in the faces of the people whom he draws. It really is a picture of the hell that is out there. Hogarth was not a theologian, not even a Christian as far as I know, but certainly he was able to depict human depravity with his painting.

I will not go on and talk more about that, but that is just to point out that it was a time in which culture had fallen to a very low point. In fact, a number of competent historians have said that England was primed for its own version of the French Revolution. Revolution came to France and not to England for a very important reason, and that is the subject of this lesson. But historians looking back at France and England at this time have said that it seemed more likely that the great social upheaval would have come to England rather than to France.

Let me talk about the religious situation for a moment. Certainly this was a time of spiritual decline in the history of England. In fact, one writer has spoken of this period as a time of “the vanishing Gospel.” The Gospel was certainly heard and preached earlier, certainly during the time of the Reformation in England and the time of the Puritans, but it had become something that was largely lost, even in the church. There were really two parts to the church by this period. There was the Church of England, the established church, and then all the others, called the Nonconformists, or the Dissenters.

The established Church of England had become largely Latitudinarian, which means that it was very broad in its views, more like the Deists whom we talked about earlier. There was a great deal of unbelief in the established church. Someone has suggested cynically that the “not” should be removed from the Ten Commandments and inserted into the Apostle’s Creed, and then you would have something of a description of the latitudinarianism of the Church of England at this time. Perhaps we should not put it quite so completely, because there were exceptions here and there of course in the state church. But by and large the state church had declined into a period of unbelief, and the Dissenters, the descendents of the heroic Puritans, were not all that much better, unfortunately. There was a loss of zeal and a loss of Orthodoxy. Sadly enough, I have to say this: the Presbyterians were almost the worst of the lot. The Presbyterians, who would have traced their roots directly back to the Puritans and the Covenanters in Scotland, had become largely Unitarian and Socinian. In the journal of Samuel Davies, the Great Awakening preacher in America, and for a short time the president of the College of New Jersey, we

have these words about England: “The most numerous and rich of the Dissenters in England were the Presbyterians, who were also the leaders of the general apostasy of the Dissenters from the principles of the Reformation.”

The decline among the Dissenters, of course, was not total and complete. We have some outstanding exceptions such as Isaac Watts, whose hymns became a force of renewal and revival in the church. Hymn singing became a powerful force particularly in nonconformity. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun,” “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” and many other hymns came from Isaac Watts. In fact, there are 41 hymns from Isaac Watts in the *Trinity Hymnal*, far more than from any other single hymn writer. We also might add to this list of exceptions Philip Doddridge, a Presbyterian minister who remained Orthodox and true to the Lord and wrote a great book called *Progress of Religion in the Soul*. Later we will look at the impact of that book on a very famous Englishman.

Overall the situation at that time was not good. But it was good for a revival. That was what was needed, and that was what God gave.

We will talk now about the Evangelical Revival in England, and as I have studied this subject, it seems to me that the best way to get this in mind is to look at the revival as a series of overlapping circles. There was a revival movement, but there were differences between the leaders of the various aspects of that revival movement. We will talk first about the Moravians, a subject of our last lesson.

The Moravians coming from Germany influenced the English church, particularly after January 1, 1739, which was called “Pentecost at New Year,” a day in Moravian history in London in which there began a period of great zeal, vigor, outreach, and growth within the Moravian community. The Moravians at first were linked with the Methodists, whom we will talk about in few minutes, but eventually they began to separate and form their own groups. The founding of the Fetter Lane Society in 1742 and other societies opened the way for Moravian evangelism and social work in England. Their leaders were people like Benjamin Ingham and John Cennick, who worked with the Wesleys and Whitefield. The Moravians did not so much plant their own churches. Although there were these Moravian communities in England, it was not their intention to raise up a strong separate denomination but to have churches that would be able to renew and bring vigor and spiritual life to the existing churches in England. “The consequence of their exceptional evangelistic effort lay in the contribution they made to the life of every Christian communion,” one of the Methodist scholars has written.

With the Moravians beginning to become active in England, we turn next to the subsequent circle, a broader, wider, and more influential circle, and that is John Wesley and the Methodists. John Wesley grew up in a Christian home. In fact, his father Samuel was a pastor, a rector in the Church of England in the parish of Epworth. Wesley’s mother, Susanna, who was a remarkable woman, was the daughter of a Puritan Divine. Samuel and Susanna had an astonishing number of children, 19, and John was the 15th in the family. Charles was next to last, number 18. When John Wesley was five years old, he was caught in a fire in the rectory at Epworth and almost died, but he was rescued in the last possible moment. His mother never let him forget that he was plucked from the burning fire. And he knew that he was destined for some great work, but he was not, of course, aware of what it was. We look at the Wesleys’ home, and I think we see a good and devout family who taught the Bible and practiced a high standard of morality. But John and Charles Wesley did not learn from their parents, and did not learn from their home and their church, the grace and truth and Christ’s justification by faith alone. Neither did they learn it at Oxford.

They went on to Oxford where they founded what was called “the Holy Club.” They gathered around them a few like-minded young men, including George Whitefield, who were determined to be holy. They read books, encouraged one another, prayed, and struggled in order to try to find a way to live a holy life. Some of the good books they read included the book by Thomas a Kempis called *The Imitation of Christ* and particularly William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. But in these books, the Wesleys and the others discovered not so much how they should become Christians as how Christians ought to live. And they still were puzzled and confused. Later John Wesley in a sermon described this time in his life as a time when he was “but almost a Christian.”

He and his brother Charles were ordained to the Anglican ministry and went to the new colony of Georgia in order to serve the settlers who were coming to Savannah, and also to reach out to the American Indians in the wilderness along the coast of Georgia, but it was a miserable failure. There is a statue of John Wesley in one of the prominent squares of Savannah, and Methodists are quite proud of that, but while Wesley was in Georgia he was not yet a Christian, according to his own testimony. And he wrote later, “All the time I was in Georgia I was beating the air. Being ignorant of the righteousness of Christ, I sought to establish my own righteousness.” The Wesleys accepted every word of Scripture as the Word of God, and they believed the articles of the Creed, but the Bible’s saving message had not yet become real in their own experience. They went back to London defeated, miserable, and discouraged. But earlier they had met some Moravians on the ship to Georgia. The Moravians, John Wesley said, “...endeavored to show me a more excellent way, but it seemed foolishness to me.” And in Savannah one of the Moravian leaders had asked John Wesley the question, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Wesley replied, “I know that He is Savior of the world.” Spangenberg said, “True, but do you know that He saved you?” And John Wesley could not answer that question when he was in Georgia. He went back to England still not really knowing that Christ had saved him, but one evening he went to a Moravian society meeting in Aldersgate Street. It was May 24, 1738. It was 8:45 PM (Wesley lets us know exactly when it happened, how it happened, and what happened). As he went into that meeting and heard someone reading from Luther, John Wesley said, “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 had saved me from the law of sin and death.” He has an answer now to Spangenberg’s question.

Three days earlier Charles Wesley was converted. He too was helped by the Moravians. He was encouraged by the Moravians to study Luther’s commentary on Galatians, and as he studied that book he became deeply impressed by Galatians 2:20—“The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me”—and particularly Luther’s comment, “Dwell long on this little word: me.” So I am sure it was the question of Spangenberg back in Georgia that stayed with the Wesleys. And finally through the Moravians, and particularly through the writings of Luther, these two men became true and earnest Christians.

Wesley’s conversion made him a fiery evangelist. As soon as he was converted, he knew what his work was. It was to preach Christ everywhere. He said, “Then it pleased God to kindle a fire which I trust should never be extinguished.” And a year later he said, “I look upon all the world as my parish.” Anglican ministers stayed in one parish and did not encroach on the neighboring territory of somebody else, but Wesley wanted to go everywhere and preach to everyone, and that is exactly what he did.

Let me talk a moment about Wesley’s doctrine. Notice what Charles Spurgeon, the English Baptist Calvinist, said in tribute to Wesley: “Peace to his ashes but death to his errors.” Life to all the truth he preached and so on, but Spurgeon had in mind two things, two errors: the Arminian theology of Wesley and the doctrine of entire sanctification. Wesley’s Arminian theology is what we can call evangelical Arminianism. He certainly believed that salvation is a gift of God through Christ, but he also believed

that grace is offered to everyone and that acceptance or rejection of grace depends ultimately on the human will, the human choice. John Wesley could never understand why George Whitefield and the others were sold on Calvinism. He said once in a letter, “What are the charms of Calvinism? How is it that so many fall in love with it?” And he set his course in the other direction, which would strain his relations with his Calvinist friends. But, to the credit of both sides, they maintained fellowship to the very end though they disagreed on Arminian and Calvinist theology.

The other theological point that Spurgeon had in mind in that quotation was the doctrine of entire sanctification. John Wesley focused on texts like 1 John 3:8, which says, “He that is born of God does not sin.” And as Martyn Lloyd-Jones has explained it, Wesley got a few texts and very logically insisted on the complete application of those texts, but he ignored other statements in the Bible that would have led him to a more balanced view of sanctification. In Wesley’s understanding of it, entire sanctification is an instantaneous change that eradicates all sin. But it is interesting to read Wesley carefully there. It does not eradicate errors; it does not eradicate shortcomings; it does not eradicate infirmities; it does not eradicate backslidings. So Wesley’s definition of sin has to change a bit not to include everything in order for him to say that entire sanctification eradicates all sin. It eradicates, in his view, a conscious violation of a known command of God. Methodist scholars have called it “relative perfectionism.”

Spurgeon talked about something else in connection with the Wesleys, a much more pleasant and happy topic, and that is the hymns of the Wesleys. They both wrote hymns, but Charles Wesley was the great hymn writer. In the *Trinity Hymnal* there are five hymns from John and 19 from Charles. It seems like a large number of hymns in a Presbyterian hymn book from a Methodist hymn writer, but after all, Charles Wesley wrote over 6000 hymns, so we have not selected all that many from his total corpus. But there are some wonderful hymns, including “And Can it Be,” which is the testimony of Charles Wesley’s conversion. It seems to me a great Calvinistic statement of God’s full grace in saving a sinner: “I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off; / My heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.” It is not a Semi-Pelagian hymn; it is an Augustinian hymn in which Charles Wesley describes his own conversion. A year later on the anniversary of his conversion he wrote a hymn under the title “For the Anniversary Day of One’s Conversion,” which we now know as the hymn that begins “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise.”

The work of the Wesleys—the preaching of the Wesleys, their zeal and their earnestness—led to a group of people called the Methodists. At first the word “Methodist” was used for all supporters of the revival and not for people who were members of a separate church. But Anglicans and Presbyterians and anybody else who supported the Evangelical Revival were called Methodists, a word that went back to the days of the Holy Club in Oxford. It means people were serious and methodical and determined to carry out a reform of the church. But eventually the Moravians separated, and the Methodist movement divided into an Arminian and a Calvinist branch. The first Methodist Society, as it was called, was gathered at the foundry in the Moorfields in London in 1739. This was intended to be a society, a group, within the church. Not people who were leaving the Church of England, but a group of earnest Christians, something like the colleges of piety in Spener’s Pietist movement in Germany. But gradually those societies became more like separate churches. And at the ordination of Thomas Coke by John Wesley in 1784, when Wesley directly ordained this Methodist bishop—he was not ordained through the Church of England, but by John Wesley—then there was, for all purposes, the establishment of a separate church called the Methodist Church.

John Wesley is much better known than George Whitefield, his friend from the Holy Club days at Oxford. But Whitefield was converted several years before the Wesleys. Although, it is interesting to learn that he was converted because Charles Wesley gave him a book by Henry Scougal, *The Life of*

God in the Soul of Man. Scougal, you remember, was that devout and earnest Scottish Episcopalian. He wrote a little book called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, and when Whitefield read that book, he wrote, "It was the means by which God showed me that I must be born again or be damned." And Whitefield was converted, and he preached the true Gospel before the Wesleys got back from Georgia. Whitefield was the first to preach out of doors. John Wesley is usually remembered as the preacher who went outside to preach, which shocked proper church people who did not think that God could work out of doors. And yet Whitefield had already done it.

The revival movement included a count, Count von Zinzendorf, and it also included a countess, Lady Huntingdon. She was a major figure in the revival, a very remarkable woman. You can read John Henry Newman's tribute to her. Even though Newman became a Roman Catholic, as we will see later, he had high regard for this remarkable woman. And it was Lady Huntingdon who supported Whitefield and the others, but particularly Whitefield. There are 93 letters that we have that George Whitefield wrote to Lady Huntingdon, far more than he wrote to any other person. And there was not only her personal support, but what was called "Lady Huntingdon's Connexion." It was almost like a church within a church again, like the Methodists of Wesley. Lady Huntingdon's Connexion embraced colleges and seminaries and societies and churches functioning within the Church of England at least for a while, as she used her money and her influence to further the movement of revival in England.

Whitefield preached not only in England but also in Wales. The Wesleys preached in Wales too, but Whitefield's influence was much greater than the Wesleys' in Wales. And as we will see in the next lesson, Whitefield preached frequently in America. The Wesleys never came back to America after those disastrous several years in Georgia. But Whitefield came over many times to Savannah and other places in the American colonies, and we will look at that in some detail in the next lesson. But Whitefield preached in Wales, and he preached in Scotland.

When George Whitefield first went to Scotland, it was during the days of a split in the Church of Scotland. A man named Ralph Erskine had led a group of people out of the Church of Scotland and formed the Associate Presbytery. That is the ancestry of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church today. And that division in the Church of Scotland was, I think, a necessary one because people were losing sight of the true Gospel in Scotland, as they had already in the Church of England. But these separatist Presbyterians were very concerned that Whitefield preach only for them and with them and move in their circles and not get involved in the more liberal Church of Scotland. In fact, they wanted Whitefield to renounce his Anglican ordination, and they asked him his views on the Solemn League and Covenant, which had taken place 100 years before. His answer to that second question indicates that he would not have done very well on one of my exams, because he said he was too busy to get into anything like that, and he had matters of greater importance before him, which was to preach the Gospel. And even though he sympathized with these Scottish brethren who had left the state church, he refused to limit his ministry to their pulpits, declaring in a famous quotation, "If the pope himself would lend me his pulpit, I would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Jesus Christ therein."

Well revival did come to Scotland, and it came to the Church of Scotland, the state church—the evangelical pastors and parishes within the state church—beginning in the northern Highlands by 1739, and in the famous Cambuslang work of 1742 in the church near Glasgow of William M'Culloch, about the same time that revival was breaking out with Jonathan Edwards in Northampton in Massachusetts, which we will look at in the next lesson. All of this was supported by Scotland's Lady Huntingdon, Lady Glenorchy, whose life is one of the abiding treasures of Scotland's religious history.

We will come next time to Whitefield in America, but let us think about the revival in Wales for a moment. That revival was begun by such men as Griffith Jones and Daniel Rowland and Howell Harris. Harris was converted in an unusual way. Let me tell you that story. It was Palm Sunday, March 30, 1735, when he attended the parish church near the town where he was living in Wales. The vicar announced that there would be a communion service the following Sunday, and this vicar was an evangelical vicar of the Church of England. He announced that next Sunday, which would be Easter Sunday, there would be a communion service, and in the announcement he said, “If you are not fit to take communion, you are not fit to pray. And if you are not fit to pray, you are not fit to live. And if you are not fit to live, you are not fit to die.” That led to Harris’s conviction, repentance, and conversion. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who of course was Welsh and loved these figures and loved this story, said, “You can bring people to conviction of sin even through an announcement. You never know what God is going to use.”

Another leader in the movement in Wales was William Williams, who wrote, “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. / I am weak but Thou art mighty. Hold me with thy powerful hand,” which, sung to the Welsh tune *Cwm Rhondda*, became a kind of symbol of the Welsh revival. I think you will notice in my comments in this lesson that this is a time of the writing of hymns—the golden age of English hymnody. George Whitefield became the catalyst, bringing together the various aspects of the revival within Wales, out of which came the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church, later called the Welsh Presbyterian Church, which in the nineteenth century was the strongest, most prominent church in that part of the British Isles.

We have looked at the Moravians, the Methodists, and Whitefield and his associates. And I need to close with another overlapping circle of revival. That is the Anglican Evangelicals.

Eventually the word “Methodist” was used for the people in the Methodist Church. “Evangelical” would be used for those people who remained in the state church but had an evangelical revival theology.

I think I will bring this lesson to a close with the words, “And what more shall I say?” I do not have time to tell about Samuel Walker in Cornwall and William Romaine in London. And there is the fearless and loveable William Grimshaw, of Haworth in Yorkshire, a parish that later was served by the father of Charlotte and Elizabeth Bronte; their famous novels are set in that part of Yorkshire. And I do not have time to tell about John Berridge in East Anglia, a man who wrote his own epitaph, which was then placed in his own church, and even after he died he was preaching by means of that epitaph. As you read it you get certain statements about the life of John Berridge, but in the middle of it all is the question, “Reader, art thou born again?” and then some more about the life of John Berridge. And I do not have time to talk about the ministry of Henry Venn and that of his son John Venn and his grandson Henry Venn and what they contributed to the works of mercy and mission, although their names will come up again. And sadly, I do not have time to talk about that wonderful man, John Newton, the slave trader who was converted. He said, “I can never forget two things: first, that I was a great sinner, and second, that Jesus is a great Savior.” He was a hymn writer—“Amazing Grace” is only one of his great hymns—and a spiritual counselor. His book, *Cardiphonia* or “Voice of the Heart” is a spiritual and devotional treasure that you should read. And Newton was an inspiration to the second general of Anglican Evangelicals who lit their torches from his flame.

And I do not have time to talk about another outstanding woman, Hannah More, also inspired by John Newton. She established schools and projects to help the poor and wrote many religious books and tracts in which she tried to communicate the Gospel to the ordinary, simple people of her time.

“Therefore, seeing that we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that the Lord Himself has set for us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Let me clarify some things from the lesson. Some may wonder about Socinianism. Very much like Unitarianism, Socinianism is a doctrine of Christ that teaches that He is a good example and a good man but did not in any sense die for our sins, at least in the sense that Orthodoxy had understood that substitutionary atonement. Unitarianism of course says that the Trinity is not true Christian doctrine, but that there is only God the Father, and Christ, who is a good man and a servant of God’s.

Why is Whitefield not as well-known as Wesley? Of course in our circles, Whitefield is well known. But thinking largely, in all of the world and church history, I think Wesley is far better known, and one of the reasons is the Methodist Church. Whitefield did not found a church, although he did influence the formation of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church, and he was the first moderator of that church. But that was a relatively small movement, and you have got Methodism all over the world today. And everybody knows, at least all Methodists know, that John Wesley was their founder. I think because of that Wesley is more accessible than Whitefield. So we really need to correct that, because Whitefield is equal to Wesley in many ways, except as a hymn writer. He was not a very good hymn writer. I have read some of his poetry and his journal, and it is not up to either of the Wesleys, so he would have done better to leave that to the Wesleys. But as a preacher he had tremendous influence, particularly in America, as we will see in the next lesson. As we move to America, Whitefield is much better known.

Whitefield did stay in the Church of England all his life. He died as a member of the Church of England. He saw himself as a Methodist within the Church of England, using “Methodist” in the earlier use of the word—somebody who supported the revival. But, despite all the opposition to him, and it was pretty intense, Whitefield remained a loyal member of the Church of England. We will see as we come to America, though, that his influence was really not so much in the Church of England. It was with the Presbyterians and the Baptists and others. In fact, it was almost in what we could call the creation of evangelicalism as a kind of trans-denominational influence, where denominations are not all that important. In fact, I will probably quote next time part of a famous sermon from Whitefield in which he makes that very point. So he was part of the Church of England, yes, but there is something much bigger and greater and more wonderful than the Church of England, and that is the Christian church.

Why did the Puritans decline so precipitously? That is a fascinating question, although it is a sad one to have to deal with. When there is a great energetic push for the truth, people are committed to it, they work hard at it, and God blesses that; and then when it is done and it is not successful, as with the Puritan case, either to achieve something or not to achieve it, there is a kind of emotional, psychological, and even spiritual letdown. There was all this energy to accomplish something, it failed, and the children and grandchildren of those Puritans did not have the same commitment. We will see the same thing happen in the next lesson in New England. It is not too many generations from the founding fathers and mothers that the situation is pretty drab. It takes Jonathan Edwards and Whitefield and others on that side of the Atlantic to bring revival to the church.

Is there any record of debate between Wesley and the Calvinists? Yes, there is quite a bit there. Whitefield wrote back and forth, so you get the debate. You also get the feeling of tension and the sadness that went along with it, because both sides saw that it was going to mean a break, and they worked very hard to minimize that. Wesley, in my mind, was not a great theologian. I hope I do not offend any Methodists. But he was a great man, and he was able to take a truth and sort of pound it into people. Often that was good, because he was pounding the right truths, but occasionally he got the wrong handle, the wrong end of the stick, and there he went astray. So I think there are some very good

answers to John Wesley. If he had read John Calvin more carefully, or at all—I am not sure how much Calvin he read—he would have known better. If he had listened to George Whitefield he would have known better. Whitefield wrote to Wesley and said that “...when the Lord talks about ‘my sheep’—My sheep hear My voice,” that is where his Calvinism is. They are God’s sheep, and that is why they hear His voice. That is a powerful point, but Wesley was in no mood to hear it.