

EDITORIAL

The Many-Sidedness of John Wesley

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The diverse interests and manifold activities of John Wesley are virtually unparalleled in human history. His intellectual curiosity was amazing. Wesley read widely; the books which he read and that he mentioned in his *Journal* included history, geography, science, medicine, statecraft, classical literature, oratory, biography, poetry, philosophy, fiction, ethics, and above all, religion.

His activities in the aggregate were awe-inspiring. Seldom in modern times has any other man produced so massively and in so many areas. Wesley was primarily an evangelist, but he was also an educator, social reformer, literary figure, churchman, economist, philanthropist, and in some measure, at least, a scientist and a practicing lay physician. His evangelistic enterprise was such that he conceived his task to be multi-lateral, though always in the Pauline context that he “might by all means save some.” The first entry in his famous *Journal* was on October 14, 1735. The final entry was under date of Sunday, October 24, 1790. Between those two Octobers, fifty-five years apart, “there lies the most amazing record of human exertion ever penned or endured,” according to Augustine Birrell, an English author and politician, who served as a member of the British Parliament.

Wesley was an educator and literary figure. An examination of volume fourteen of the Jackson edition of his works provides convincing evidence that he was concerned about the minds of his followers as well as their souls. From its pages we see that John Wesley, the evangelist to unlearned people, became a grammarian in half a dozen languages, a writer on logic, a biographer, a historian, a translator of poems and hymns, a

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writer in natural philosophy, a music critic, a philologist, a poetry anthologist, a political controversialist, an ecclesiastical historian, a Bible commentator, a producer of novels, a lexicographer, and a publisher of hymns. He was the author or editor of approximately 400 publications. He condensed the great theological writing of Christendom in a fifty-volume *Christian Library*, the "Pioneer Five-Foot Bookshelf." He pioneered the publication of useful literature that was inexpensive and thus became one of the foremost contributors to the rise in the level of literacy in eighteenth century England. In addition, he carried on a huge correspondence. Schools for children were established as well as institutions for the protection and instruction of the poor or the ignorant. The Methodist societies and bands were places of learning. By present-day standards his educational theories were often poor, but he did give tremendous impetus to popular education.

In many ways, Wesley was a social reformer. However, he did not attack the evils of his time as a social reformer, but as a religious leader, and as a result he became the greatest social reformer of his day, and perhaps in the history of England. The most potent factor in his social concerns was the day of his evangelical conversion, May 24, 1738, when there came a vivid realization of his sonship in the family of God. Although this experience was inward and intensely individual, it heightened his genuine concern for others. He demonstrated his concern for poor and unfortunate people by his own philanthropy, by preaching sermons in their behalf, through personal work in initiating charitable enterprises, and above all, by sharing with them the transforming power of the Gospel which often led to improved economic conditions. Under Wesley's influence, the Methodists took a leading part in ministering in the prisons and in bringing about prison reforms. He was also one of the great pioneers of the anti-slavery movement. His pamphlet entitled "Thoughts on Slavery," published in 1774, was widely distributed and exerted great influence on the public conscience. He opposed luxury and was outspoken concerning the evils of smuggling, drunkenness, bribery and corrupt politics.

Wesley was a churchman and an ecumenicist in the very best sense. From his early years he had a great esteem for the church. This high regard was, at the outset, in reality a prejudiced zeal in her behalf. The spiritual crisis through which Wesley passed in 1738 became a strong factor in changing his ideas about the church, although the alteration of his earlier prejudices was not without pain. A "passion for souls" became a dominant desire thereafter and began to war with his earlier inclinations. Circumstances drove him to preach the Gospel in the open. In spite of his love of the Anglican liturgy, he practiced and encouraged extemporary

prayer. Further, he sent out some of his converts as lay preachers. When Church or ecclesiastical privilege or pronouncement stood in the way of the well-being of souls, then Wesley did not hesitate to put the good of souls first. This was for him a foremost necessity. When criticized for what were considered irregularities by accepted ecclesiastical standards, such as extemporary prayer, field preaching, and the use of lay preachers, Wesley's simple reply was that it was better to go "irregularly to heaven than to go regularly to hell."

As a man of deep convictions, John Wesley gave expression to a remarkable catholicity of spirit. Two of his standard sermons, "A Caution Against Bigotry" and "Catholic Spirit" exhibit a significant breadth of view as well as a readiness to co-operate with all sincere Christians. He cautioned concerning that bigotry which places one's own party, opinion, church, or religion, before the work of God. His ecumenism was not, however, a thin latitudinarianism. He insisted that "a man of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek, for "he is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine." He was against "muddy understanding" and "jumbling all opinions together." The catholic spirit is not speculative latitudinarianism, for unsettledness of thought is a curse, not a blessing. Neither is it any kind of practical latitudinarianism, such as indifference to public worship or to the outward manner of performing it. Nor is it indifference to all churches. Rather, it gives cordial, hearty, fellowship to all whose hearts are right with God, while valuing and praising God for all its own advantages.

Wesley's life-long interest in science and medicine speak eloquently of his cognitive powers, especially in the light of the narrow and sterile thinking of his day. His chief reading interest or diversion, aside from religion, was the natural sciences, or natural philosophy as it was called in Wesley's day. He was interested in theoretical science as well as its practical application. In an age of great need, he published volumes on medicine, the most important of which was *Primitive Physic, or An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*. This remarkable little book went through twenty-three editions in Wesley's life-time and subsequently reached its thirty-second edition. He was also a pioneer in the use of electricity as an instrument of cure. One of his books published anonymously in 1760 under the title of *The Desideratum* espoused the use of static electricity in the treatment of illness. If Wesley did little good with some of his drug therapies, he did much good with his rules for healthful living.

In the realm of political affairs, Wesley's influence was more indirect. The extensive influence of his famous and powerful tract "Thoughts on

Slavery” has been noted. He helpfully seconded and reinforced the labors of men like Wilberforce and Howard who agitated for humanitarian reform through the use of political means. The last letter he wrote was a virile, energetic one of encouragement to William Wilberforce, the apostle of emancipation, who was about to bring his anti-slavery program before Parliament. When Wesley received early, accurate, private information regarding conditions in the American colonies before the Revolutionary War broke out, he dispatched a memorable letter to Lord North, the Prime Minister, approximately forty-eight hours before the battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, which, if heeded, might have changed the whole course of English and American history.

But the many-sided Wesley was primarily an evangelist. It was the strangely warmed heart that made him a mighty instrument of God. The flame was kindled in Aldersgate Street. As Dr. Bett observed, there came to him “a spiritual energy, an evangelical zeal, an unction of the Holy One, that he had never before possessed.” In Wesley’s words, he had only “one point of view—to promote, so far as I am able, vital, practical religion; and by the grace of God to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men.” Or, in the classic statement of his objective, “to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land.” A primary guide-line for his preachers was: “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work.” It was one which he observed himself with passionate fidelity. Everything was subordinated to the spread of the gospel. This was the magnificent obsession for the many-sided Wesley.