

John Wesley and George Whitefield

We have now reached a point at which John Wesley's history, like that of his great contemporary Whitefield, becomes one undeviating uniform narrative up to the time of his death. It would be useless to dwell on one year more than another. He was always occupied in one and the same business, always going up and down the land preaching, and always conducting evangelistic measures of some kind and description. For fifty-three years--from 1738 to 1791--he held on his course, always busy, and always busy about one thing--attacking sin and ignorance everywhere, preaching repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ everywhere--awakening open sinners, leading on inquirers, building up saints--never wearied, never swerving from the path he had marked out, and never doubting of success. Those only who read the Journals he kept for fifty years can have any idea of the immense amount of work that he got through. Never perhaps did any man have so many irons in the fire at one time, and yet succeed in keeping so many hot.

Like Whitefield, he justly regarded preaching as God's chosen instrument for doing good to souls, and hence, wherever he went, his first step was to preach. Like him, too, he was ready to preach anywhere or at any hour--early in the morning or late at night, in church, in chapel, or in room--in streets, in fields, or on commons and greens. Like him, too, he was always preaching more or less the same great truths--sin, Christ, and holiness--ruin, redemption, and regeneration--the blood of Christ and the work of the Spirit--faith, repentance, and conversion--from one end of the year to the other.

Wesley, however, was very unlike Whitefield in one important respect. He did not forget to organise as well as to preach. He was not content with reaping the fields which he found ripe for the harvest. He took care to bind up his sheaves and gather them into the barn. He was as far superior to Whitefield as an administrator and man of method, as he was inferior to him as a mere preacher. (Footnote: A writer in the North British Review has well and forcibly described the difference between the two great English evangelists of the last century. "Whitefield was soul, and Wesley was system. Whitefield was the summer cloud which burst at morning or noon a fragrant exhalation over an ample track, and took the rest of the day to gather again; Wesley was the polished conduit in the midst of the garden, through which the living water glided in pearly brightness and perennial music, the same vivid stream from day to day. All force and impetus, Whitefield was the powder-blast in the quarry, and by one explosive sermon would shake a district, and detach materials for other men's long work; deft, neat, and painstaking, Wesley loved to split and trim each fragment into uniform plinths and polished stones. Whitefield was the bargeman or the waggoner who brought the timber of the

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house, and Wesley was the architect who set it up. Whitefield had no patience for ecclesiastical polity, no aptitude for pastoral details, Wesley, with a leader-like propensity for building, was always constructing societies, and with a king-like craft of ruling, was most at home when presiding over a class or a conference. It was their infelicity that they did not always work together; it was the happiness of the age, and the furtherance of the gospel, that they lived alongside of one another.") Shut out from the Church of England by the folly of its rulers, he laid the foundation of a new denomination with matchless skill, and with a rare discernment of the wants of human nature. To unite his people as one body--to give every one something to do--to make each one consider his neighbour and seek his edification--to call forth latent talent and utilise it in some direction--to keep "all at it and always at it"(to adopt his quaint saying),--these were his aims and objects. The machinery he called into existence was admirably well adapted to carry out his purposes. His preachers, lay-preachers, class-leaders, band-leaders, circuits, classes, bands, love-feasts, and watch-nights, made up a spiritual engine which stands to this day, and in its own way can hardly be improved. If one thing more than another has given permanence and solidity to Methodism, it was its founder's masterly talent for organisation.

Like Whitefield, John Wesley left no children. But he left behind him a large and influential communion, which he not only saw spring up, but lived to see it attain a vigorous and healthy maturity. The number of Methodist preachers at the time of his death amounted in the British dominions to 313, and in the United States of America to 198. The number of Methodist members in the British dominions was 76,968, and in the United States 57,621. Facts like these need no comment; they speak for themselves. Few labourers for Christ have ever been so successful as Wesley, and to none certainly was it ever given to see so much with his own eyes.

NOTE: The above excerpt comes from J.C. Ryle's *Christian Leaders of the Last Century* (London, 1878).