

# JOHN WESLEY

## *His Life and Thought*

Timothy J. Crutcher



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To my students and colleagues at  
Southern Nazarene University

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# Introduction

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*J*ohn Wesley is a significant theological figure for many people in the Protestant church, particularly for those who own the legacy of his Methodist movement and who attend one of the various denominations that have arisen from it. This book is an attempt to give the reader a basic orientation to both John Wesley's biography and to the most significant parts of his theological legacy. It is intended as an easy introduction to this rather complex figure, and so it is a book primarily designed for beginning students of Wesley in courses of ministerial preparation or for interested laypeople who would like to know more about this great thinker and evangelist. It is, therefore, a book more oriented toward the church than the formal academy. Hopefully, however, it is a book that can serve as a bridge between the two by giving readers enough "thinking handles" on Wesley that they can profitably engage deeper and more scholarly works about the man.

In part I of this book, we will introduce Wesley's biography, beginning with an overview of his historical setting and then looking at his childhood, his early adulthood, the events that began his ministry, the earliest decade of the Evangelical Revival of which he was a part and finishing with two chapters on the later sections of his life. In this brief biographical glimpse, we will try to balance both the personal details of Wesley's own life and the way his life and ministry fit into the larger controversies and issues with which he engaged.

In part II of the book, we will explore the basic intuitions that consistently emerge throughout his sermons and other writings. Wesley was what we might call an occasional theologian, meaning that he performed his theological vocation as the occasion demanded it—a little bit here, a little bit there; here a sermon, there a small tract. He never organized all of that into a systematized theology himself, and so all patterns we might use to organize his thought are somewhat artificial. However, organize we must, so our presentation of Wesley will begin with his theological method and then explore his basic views of God,

creation, human beings, and sin. With this background, we will turn to Wesley's portrayal of the great drama of salvation—both in general and in a specific “order of salvation”—and how that salvation works its way out in the corporate life of the church.

Because this book is intended as a simple introduction, we should note at the outset that Wesley's life and thought are, in fact, more complicated than they are here presented. In trying to capture the major events of his life and the major intuitions that drive his thought, many layers of nuance had to be ignored. This is, of course, where we must start when we begin our journey of learning in any area, but it helps to be reminded of that up front, lest the reader think that anything said or claimed in this book should be taken as the last word on the subject. The goal of this book is to make the big picture as clear as possible, and so we have ignored some of the complexities that would easily cloud that picture. So, while we believe that Wesley's theological vision is coherent, we can admit that Wesley's implementation of that vision in his various writings and activities was not always so coherent. However, those inconsistencies are easier to see against the backdrop of a larger vision of his work. And while they ought to concern historians and systematic theologians of our own day, they can be conveniently ignored by those just starting out on their encounter with Wesley.

Since this introduction is intended as a primary encounter with Wesley, we have focused much more on his own writings—particularly his *Journal* and his sermons—than on what other people have said about him. References outside of Wesley have been kept to a minimum, and all citations are from Wesley unless explicitly stated otherwise. In citing Wesley, we have tried to give enough information for the reader to find the quote in any edition of his work, but we have also included, where available, volume and page citations in parentheses (for example, “(8:13)”) for the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley's works (*The Works of John Wesley* [Oxford University Press and Abingdon Press, 1980–2013]). When complete, this will be the standard edition of Wesley's works in English. For those works that are yet unavailable in that edition, we have cited the previous standard editions of Wesley's works. We will cite *The Works of John Wesley* (3rd edition, edited by Thomas Jackson [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1978]) as “Jackson,” with the volume and page number. For his later letters, we will use *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (edited by John Telford [London: Epworth, 1931]) and cite that as “Telford,” also with volume and page

number. In any quote from Wesley, the reader may assume that all emphases and italics come from Wesley's published originals.

Finally, we should mention a feature of our use of language that some English readers might find odd, namely the attempt to avoid gender-biased language—particularly when referring to God. This means we will not use any pronouns for God, always referring to God as God and not with designations such as “he” or “him.” It may sound unnatural, but then using human language to talk about God is already unnatural in some way. Perhaps the awkwardness of talking about what God does for God's self or the way God feels about God's creation will remind us that God does not fit nicely and neatly in our premade human categories of thought or language. Wesley, of course, lived in a time before such concerns arose, and we have made no attempt to conform Wesley's writings to our contemporary sensitivities. He will use masculine pronouns for God, and say “man,” “mankind,” and “he” when referring to generic persons. Perhaps we should be bothered by such things, but we will just have to forgive him and his culture for their blindness up front. This seems better than constantly calling attention to it with designations such as “[*sic*].”

This, then, is our road map, a brief orientation toward the exploration ahead of us. However, road maps only really matter if we follow them, so let us begin the journey.

PART I

# JOHN WESLEY'S LIFE



*one*

## Wesley's Eighteenth-Century England

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*To* understand a writer like John Wesley—or any writer from the past, for that matter—it helps to understand something of the environment in which he or she lived and wrote. Meaning is always a function of context, and so we often need to put writers in their historical context to figure out what they meant—especially ones who lived centuries before we were born. The world to which they wrote was different from ours. It had different struggles, different values, and different blind spots. Knowing something about those differences helps us to hear what those writers were saying more clearly. Of course, we do the work of history with much “fear and trembling,” since we cannot claim to understand even our own context perfectly. If we don’t understand all the things that shape how we think and act today, we are not likely to get everything right about a time that is now only available to us through documents and artifacts. Still, even our imperfect attempts at understanding John Wesley’s historical context should prevent some of the mistakes we would make if we tried to read him as though he were writing today. Sometimes it is our distance and difference from those writers that make them most helpful to us, and understanding that distance brings their work into clearer focus.

John Wesley lived from 1703 until 1791 in England, the country occupying the southeast half of the island of Britain. The eighteenth century was a period of significant change for England as the older structures of society that had been inherited from the medieval era began to give way to those that looked more like modern ones. There were changes in religion, politics, thought, and economics. There was even a change in the calendar.

Wesley lived through these changes and responded to many of them. How one sees Wesley relating to his culture, however, is still a matter of much debate. For a long time, many people—particularly Wesley's Methodist offspring—found it important to emphasize Wesley's life and work as a reaction *against* the “corrupting” trends of church and society in eighteenth-century Britain. So certain features of Wesley's time were emphasized—such as the decline in church attendance or the increasing numbers of urban poor—because these were the things to which Wesley most creatively responded. Other features of Wesley's response to his time, ones that showed his commonality with it—such as his opposition to the American Revolution or his refusal to officially withdraw from the Church of England—were given less weight.

In the last half-century or so, however, historians have changed the way they looked at the eighteenth century, and many Christians have renewed their commitment to focus on what unites various Christian groups instead of what divides them. Contemporary biographers of Wesley now tend to highlight those things Wesley had in common with his era and his “home church.” On the basis of these commonalities, some Wesleyans even want to hold Wesley up as a resource to all of Christianity and not just as the champion and founder of Methodist Protestantism.

Both perspectives have their good and bad points, but beginning readers of Wesley ought to feel no pressure to take sides in such a debate. As with so many things about Wesley, it is better to take a both-and approach to Wesley's engagement with his context than an either-or one. Wesley was both a product of his time and a challenge to it. He was an exemplar of the “middle way” of Anglicanism and a thorn in its institutional side. He was a man who represented some of the ideals of his time, but he also reminded his hearers of the many ways in which English life fell far short of its own ideals.

Here then are a few crucial features of Wesley's context that provide helpful background for understanding his life and thought. Even though we can only scratch the surface of the deep issues involved, these features should be enough to give the reader who is unfamiliar with eighteenth-century England a basic sense of the time. Those features are the established and Protestant church of the country (the Church of England), the political turmoil of the day, the intellectual climate of the time, and the way in which society was changing. In each case, we will explain the issues involved and then foreshadow just a bit of how those issues are important for understanding Wesley.

## The Established, Protestant Church of England

One good place to start putting together the pieces of Wesley's context is with the Church of England, which we today also refer to as the Anglican Church. This is the church that nurtured and ordained him and then had to wrestle with the challenges he presented and the issues he raised. Most people alive today, whether they agree with it or not, are familiar with the concept of a separation between church and state. Wesley's world, however, was not. The opinion of the great majority of the English during Wesley's lifetime was that church and state were two inseparable facets of society that were to work together for each other's mutual good.

Nearly two hundred years before Wesley's time, in 1534, King Henry VIII separated the Church of England from the "Church of Rome" and made himself the head of the church as well as the state. He believed, as did most people in Wesley's day, that he ruled by divine right, and so to disobey the king was ultimately to disobey God. In the king, church and state were thus indivisibly linked, but that link also permeated English society outside the palace. For example, bishops in the Church of England had seats in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the English Parliament. This gave them political power but could also distract them from their pastoral duties. Many other government officials, such as justices of the peace, were also clergy, so people often engaged with the church and the state at the same time. Finally, there were laws that enforced Anglican belief and practice, so religion was always a legal matter and not just a moral or personal one.

All this made the Church of England the "established" church in English society, meaning that it was the only official religion of the country. Only those members of the Church of England who regularly took Communion could hold a political office. Though by Wesley's day there was official toleration for those who disagreed with the church's teachings or structure, toleration was not the same thing as freedom of religion. Dissenters or Nonconformists, as they were called, were usually not prosecuted for their disagreement, but their disagreement was still technically illegal. They were also subject to restrictions that were severe enough to make many of them unhappy with England's Anglican monarchy. Nevertheless, Henry VIII's union of church and state proved very durable and only began to break down at the end of Wesley's life.<sup>1</sup>

Knowing about this is important because Wesley always had an ambiguous relationship to his "mother church." On the one hand, he explicitly defended

this “established church” system. Wesley affirmed that God was the basis of government, that kings ruled by divine right, and he used that idea to argue against the American Revolution. He resisted the idea of registering his Methodists as Dissenters, and he remained an Anglican priest to his dying day. On the other hand, Wesley often acted in ways that compromised this principle. He valued the mission of the church to save souls and make people holy more than he valued the Anglican structures that were supposed to support that mission. Wesley’s use of lay preachers rather than officially ordained ones, his disregard for parish boundaries, and his ordaining of priests all challenged the established church from the inside just as Dissenters did from the outside. After the American Revolution, Wesley encouraged the American Methodists to function as a free and independent church that did not need government support. So while Wesley shared the basic assumption that church and state were connected, he was committed to an ideal of Christianity that made him challenge some parts of the church-state system and this got him into trouble. We will see many examples of this as we walk through Wesley’s life.

## Political Turmoil

England’s political history in the eighteenth century—as well as the half-century or so leading up to it—was also connected to religious issues. These issues formed the background against which people discussed both religion and politics, and they even shaped England’s international affairs and its place on the world stage.

England’s political-religious upheaval began in the Reformation in the 1530s, but it reached a critical peak with the English Civil Wars of 1642-51 and the Puritan Commonwealth and Protectorate of 1649-59. The Puritans were those in the Church of England who wanted to “purify” it of liturgical elements and make it more like the Protestant churches of the European continent. Most people who lived through this turmoil had died by Wesley’s time, but the cultural memory of those events still shaped English fears and concerns. Although there were serious economic issues that fed those civil wars, the popular understanding of them was as religious conflicts in which radical Protestants had killed the king, exiled his son, and then unsuccessfully tried to govern the country and impose their radical religion on everyone else.

To many Anglicans, these events proved how dangerous religious fanaticism could be. It was not just that people disagreed about doctrine and practice.

It was that people were so emotionally invested in their religion that they were willing to kill for their ideas. The memory of these conflicts with the Puritans made people suspicious of any emotional religion that deviated from a “normal” pattern of moral religion and moderate church attendance (whether at established Anglican churches or registered Nonconformist ones). Such religious fervor was not just distasteful; it might actually be a threat to the country.

This helps us understand why Wesley faced such serious opposition. It is one thing to have a few odd preachers who want people to be more religious than they are. It is quite another if stirring up religious emotions could be seen as a prelude to civil war. As we will see, in Wesley's lifetime, this took the form of both censure from society's elite and mob violence against the Methodists from those farther down on the social scale.

The conflict with the Puritans also shaped the theological environment of the Church of England, which was officially restored to its former position along with the restoration of the monarchy. Since the Puritans wanted to do away with “high church” things such as bishops and prayer books, the newly restored Anglican leaders naturally emphasized them. The Puritans were strong Calvinists in their theology, emphasizing the complete sinfulness of humanity and the doctrine of predestination. Therefore, it was easy for Anglican leaders to emphasize opposing ideas like the pursuit of holiness through good works and the means of grace or the idea that people were not predestined but had free will.

These anti-Puritan emphases were imposed on the church, and this forced many ministers (including both of Wesley's grandfathers) to resign their Church of England positions and become Dissenters. This attitude also pervaded the Church of England's minister training schools, such as Oxford, which Wesley attended as a young man. Wesley was, thus, exposed to both sides of this debate, and we shall see that his own attitudes were an eclectic mix of the positions represented by the Puritans and by the so-called Caroline Divines (since “Carol” is the Latin form of “Charles,” the new king).

Things did not simply quiet down for England when the Convention Parliament of 1660 invited Charles II—the exiled son of the king whom an earlier Parliament had beheaded—to return from exile and occupy the English throne. Charles II had spent the intervening decade in exile in France, and this was suspicious for two reasons. First, France had been England's ancient “enemy,” or at least their “sibling rival,” for hundreds of years. Second, related to that, France

was also staunchly Roman Catholic. This made it a religious adversary as well as a political one.

Charles II was supposed to be the head of the Church of England, a Protestant church, so any ties to Roman Catholicism were suspicious. These suspicions were confirmed when Charles joined the Roman Catholic Church on his deathbed. The problem became even worse under the reign of his brother, James II. James's strong pro-French and pro-Catholic leanings eventually led to a revolution. Seven English nobles invited James's Protestant daughter, Mary, and her Dutch husband, William of Orange, to invade the country and save the English throne for Protestantism. James fled back to France after a few minor skirmishes in an event remembered in Wesley's day as the Glorious Revolution of 1688. William and Mary were then recognized by Parliament as joint rulers, even though the previous king was still alive.

With this change in monarchy, two important political orientations arose in England, eventually coming together as political parties. One party, known as the Whigs, emphasized the role of the English Parliament in English government, and they sought to give that body an ever-increasing priority and control. The other party, known as Tories, felt that the king should be seen as the central element in government and that he was to be obeyed in all things.

The Glorious Revolution cast a long shadow over most of Wesley's life, even though it happened fifteen years before he was born. Most English had not taken sides during the invasion, either to defend their king or to aid his rival. When the dust settled, they accepted the new situation and took their oaths of loyalty to the new monarchs. A significant minority, however, could not accept this outcome. On principle, they believed that a monarch only ruled by divine right and that no group of people—nobles, Parliament, or otherwise—could change that. They could not swear oaths to their new king because they believed that James II was still their rightful king, however much they might disagree with his religion or his politics. These people were known as nonjurors (because they refused to swear the loyalty oath), and they were excluded from England's official political and religious life. As we shall see, Wesley's mother, Susanna, had sympathies in that direction, and that caused problems in the home.

Mary died in 1694, and William reigned alone as king until his death in 1702. He was followed on the throne by James's other Protestant daughter, Anne. By the time Queen Anne was crowned, James himself had passed away, so there were fewer principled objections to her becoming queen, but there were still some who believed

that James's male heirs—particularly his son James and his grandson Charles—were still the rightful rulers of England. These people were called Jacobites (after the Hebrew and Greek forms of the name “James”), and armed Jacobite rebellions intent on putting the Old Pretender (James III) or the Young Pretender (Charles III) on the throne would unsettle England for the next fifty years or so.

Neither William and Mary nor Queen Anne and her husband had any surviving children. So to secure England's throne for Protestantism, Parliament assigned the royal succession to the granddaughter of a previous king (James I of England, who ruled from 1603 to 1625) and to her Protestant heirs. Queen Anne died in 1714, when Wesley was only eleven, and so George, Elector of Hanover in Germany, became George I of England. The very next year, 1715, there was a significant Jacobite uprising in northern England and Scotland, often known as the Fifteen. Another such uprising happened in 1745 (predictably known as the Forty-Five), near the beginning of Wesley's Evangelical Revival. Behind these uprisings, there was always the threat that the French would invade England and help restore James II's descendants to the throne and hence Roman Catholicism to England. It was not until Britain's military victories over France in the 1740s-60s and the coming of George III to the throne in 1760 that this threat subsided. It was, however, soon replaced by the looming threat of American independence.

Knowing this political background helps us to make sense of a couple of features of Wesley's writing and people's reaction to it. First of all, Wesley's era felt politically insecure, and Wesley often addressed that insecurity. Many of his works reflect a man addressing an unsettled time, and Wesley worked not only to calm unnecessary fears but also to use the insecurity of this world to point people toward the next one.

Second, this helps us see why Wesley was often accused of “popery,” as Roman Catholicism was derisively called in Wesley's day, since such attacks could paint Wesley as both a political and a religious threat. In such an either-or political environment, Wesley's both-and arguments were often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Anything he said that sounded too much like Puritan or Roman Catholic theology would lead to attacks from Anglicans, since they were used to fighting on both of those fronts. Wesley, then, was caught in a triangle of theological concerns between Puritanism, Roman Catholicism, and the Church of England. Since Wesley often had to defend himself against very different—even opposite—attacks, some of his defenses sound confused, even

contradictory. The better we understand this political-religious background, the better we will understand Wesley's response to it.

## Intellectual Climate

Politics and religion were not the only things on the public stage of eighteenth-century English life, however dominant they may seem at times. Wesley's age was often styled the Age of Reason, and there were many intellectual changes happening, particularly in science and philosophy. Sometimes Wesley approved of these new ideas, but other times he opposed them. While Wesley admired reason, philosophy, and science, he also saw their limits, and this tension is important for the way he thought.

Science as a discipline grew in importance and visibility in English culture during Wesley's life. People pursued scientific knowledge and began to adopt a scientific outlook on the world. Soon after the Restoration, King Charles II founded the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge (more commonly known simply as the Royal Society). This gave an official, royal backing to the advance of scientific knowledge and a public stamp of approval on scientific projects. Famous Royal Society presidents, such as Isaac Newton (1643–1727), focused more public attention on science. Scientific inventions, particularly ones involving textile technology and steam power, set up England to become the first industrialized country, and science became an acceptable—sometimes even expected—pursuit of the leisure classes.

The antagonism many today feel between science and religion had not yet developed in Wesley's day. Many of England's noted scientists, such as Isaac Newton and Joseph Priestley, had strong religious interests and inclinations (though admittedly not always toward the traditional doctrines of Christianity). Most people saw science as perfectly compatible with—even a natural consequence of—a belief in a Creator God. Not only did most scientists believe in God, but also a number of prominent bishops of the Church of England spoke of science with high praise, and clergy were often engaged in scientific pursuits themselves.

Wesley was very much a man of his time when it comes to this issue. He had a strong interest in science and enjoyed reading about the new inventions and discoveries—particularly those that promised to improve people's lives. Wesley himself wrote on electricity and compiled a very popular list of home remedies called *Primitive Physick*, which he insisted was based on empirical observation.<sup>2</sup> He urged the study of science in the school that he founded in Kingswood,



among his Methodist preachers, and even to all ministers, claiming that it was important for understanding the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Wesley saw science, then, as an aid to faith and not a threat.

However, the philosophy that arose alongside of science was another matter completely. Where science was practical and gave people a good way to understand the physical world, Wesley agreed with it and used it. He was even somewhat scientific in his approach to religious concerns. But when science offered a naturalistic worldview with no room for divine intervention, Wesley opposed it with all his might. Alongside Wesley's interest in science, we also find him believing in ghosts and witches. He argued for the limitations of scientific knowledge and for a divine providence that worked alongside the physical causes of things. So while science was important to Wesley, its philosophy did not govern his world. This attitude comes through in many of his works throughout his life.

## Changes in Society

Along with these changes in thought, changes in patterns of living arose in the eighteenth century as well. Most of these changes were gradual but clear. Slowly but surely, the social landscape of England changed as commerce developed and cities and towns became more important. Wesley found in these changes many opportunities for ministry that were being missed by the more traditional established church.

Many significant changes were economic ones introduced by advances in technology and new opportunities for trade. For most of its history, England was a rural society whose primary economic activity was farming and raising livestock, to which was added a host of cottage industries such as making cloth. It had only one city of any significant size, London, and most of its citizens lived in the country rather than in town. Towns were mainly places for tradesmen to gather to sell goods and for the upper classes to gather for social events. This slowly changed during Wesley's life.

New modes of production encouraged people to live closer together for economic reasons. People began to move to the towns to find employment, but that meant leaving the family-and-village support networks that had held up English society for so long. The loss of these networks left people vulnerable both to the accidents of life and to the temptations of anonymous urban living. The established church had a difficult time keeping up with these changes, and

so fewer and fewer people were being effectively served by its parish system and the structure for pastoral ministry that it dictated. Church attendance declined during this period, and most people thought morality did as well.

Whether one reads Wesley's activity as a supplement to the church or as a challenge to it, his most distinctive practices arise from this changing social background. Class meetings and field preaching addressed spiritual needs left unmet by traditional church structures. The Methodist movement thrived in towns where Church of England structures were lacking, as well as in those rural areas where the same was true. Even Wesley's work in compassionate ministry—such as founding dispensaries for the poor or starting a school for coal miners' children—is best understood as a response to the increasing ineffectiveness of the traditional means of social support.

One final change was not so significant for Wesley's time, but it certainly affects the way we today read about it. Halfway through Wesley's life, England changed calendars, creating two separate systems of recording the dates of events. The old calendar, called the Julian calendar, had been in use since the Roman Empire. According to that calendar, each year contained exactly  $365\frac{1}{4}$  days. The problem was that this formula was about eleven minutes off, which made the calendar year lag behind the solar year (as reckoned by equinoxes and solstices). For Catholic countries, Pope Gregory XIII fixed this problem in 1582 with his Gregorian calendar, which was more accurate and which closed the gap between the solar year and the calendar year. Protestant England originally did not want to follow this Catholic idea, but by the 1750s it had become a problem. So they adopted the new calendar and reset their dates to match everyone else's. So, for example, when Wesley was born, calendars in England said it was June 17, 1703. After 1752, however, Wesley celebrated his birthday on June 28, which was the date the Gregorian calendar would have said had it been used at the time. At the same time, England also moved the start of the New Year officially back to January 1 (the legal year used to begin on March 25), which explains why many dates in Wesley's letters are written with two dates (e.g., February 1740/41). When that happens, it is the second year that conforms to our modern way of numbering.

There is much more that could be said about the times in which Wesley lived and served, but this is sufficient to orient us for now. With this bit of background, we will be more alert to some of the important features of Wesley's

context and have more tools to make sense of his life. And so it is to that life that we must now turn.