

101. THE METHODISTS

When Governor-King William III ended the persecution in England in 1688 and brought freedom of conscience, God's church finally obtained rest. What a privilege! How the martyrs would have loved to have witnessed that! They had lived through a time of unrest and persecution. Rome had hunted them like wild animals, and their lives were daily in danger. Finally, they gave their life for the truth. And now ... rest! Peace! No more persecution! Everyone could go to God's house without fear of being arrested. Again, what a privilege! How thankful God's people should be for this. The Lord had finally answered their many prayers. At times, it had seemed as if the oppression would *never* end! And now a change had come! Yes, they should have thanked the Lord for that, but...

At the start many *had* sincerely thanked the Lord for delivering them from distress. However, they slowly became used to better times. That's always the way - we only appreciate something when we can't have it.

After some time, the people no longer appreciated the service of the Lord, for which they had previously been willing to offer their lives. But times change. Industry developed, bringing prosperity and a booming economy.

But there was a great contrast between the rich and the poor. The nobles began to hold religion in contempt. They became ashamed of religion. Indifference increased among the middle class. They didn't care much about serving the Lord, and ignorance and crudeness were rife among the poor. There was a significant decline in faith and love in England's churches. The people lived in the greatest sins. The church's spiritual condition was very, very sad. Even among the preachers, drunkenness often occurred. So it wasn't

surprising that the people had little respect for the church and its preachers.

Now we understand why the nobles began to be ashamed of religion and why the people became indifferent and hardly ever went to church. They could not respect such leaders.

And the poor?

Their life was so miserable and full of sorrow, poverty and want that they no longer desired the Word.

If anyone wants to feel how a poor sinner is tormented in purgatory, let him travel to the industrial city of Bradford.

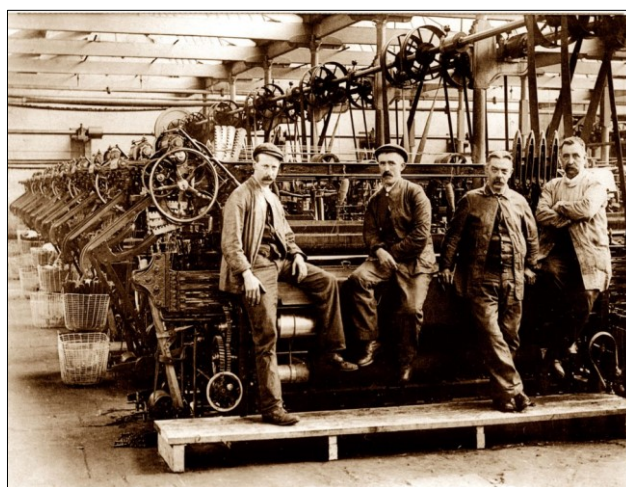
George Weerth , German writer and poet.



During the Middle Ages, the north of England was an immense wilderness. But villages and cities were built, housing thousands of people.

Many of them worked in the mines or the factories. When I say 'factory', you must not think of today's factories with plenty of light and air, where the sun shines through the windows. Back then, people worked in dark, gloomy, stinking sheds. We can't describe it differently. They worked in those dark, smelly places from early morning till late at night.

When they finally stopped working for the day, they still tried to enjoy life a bit by indulging in sinful pleasures. They visited the taverns to drink their sorrows away. Scuffles with knives and

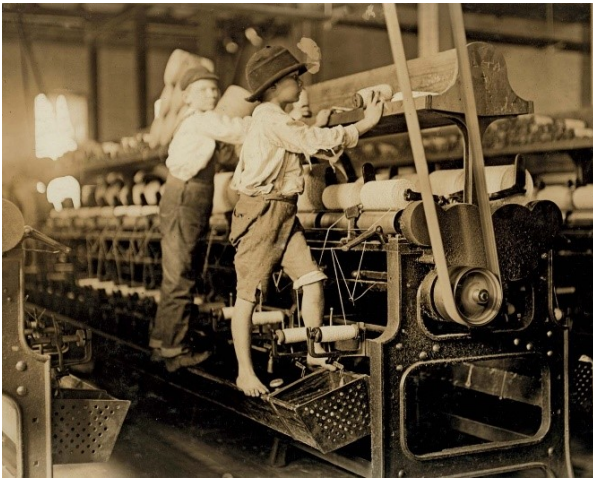


Cotton mills in Manchester in the 18th century.

<https://www.englishfinecottons.co.uk/journal/heritage/potte>

daggers were everyday occurrences. Life was rough and wicked.

Schools, where the children could receive an education? They didn't exist. There was no time or money for that! The children had to help earn a living for the family. At a very young age, the children had to work long days in those dark, unhealthy, musty factories for a few pennies. Those children had no happy, carefree youth.



Child labour. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 01581)

Churches, where the people could listen to the preaching of God's Word on Sunday and be encouraged and comforted by the Lord? They did not exist. There was no time nor money for that either!

There was a small church for the wealthy. They had their own pastor. But the poor had nothing! The government did not help them either. They made those poor people work hard all day for little money but did not care about them as people. The rich only wanted to *profit* as much as possible from those poor workers. No wonder those people became careless and tried to get out of life what they could; however they could!

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

One day, a young preacher suddenly appears among the poorest of those living in such deep poverty and begins preaching in the open field.

Not in a church because they did not have them, and they were not allowed to enter the little church of the rich. No way! That was much too good for such poor workers. Spontaneously that

young preacher begins to preach in the open field. Curiously, the poor, filthy, neglected miners come running.

"What has that fellow got to say?" they ask themselves.

Somewhat suspiciously, they look him up and down. They are not used to anyone paying them any attention or worrying about them! When about two hundred filthy, shabby people surround that stranger, he tells them clearly that deliverance from their great distress is possible. He tells them about Jesus Christ, Who was also poor, just like they are; so poor that He was born in a stable, so poor that His cradle was a feeding trough for animals, so poor that He only wore some swaddling cloths. He tells them that Jesus Christ was so poor that He often slept in the open air and did not even have a stone as a pillow to lay His head on. See those rough miners stand there. It has become breathlessly quiet. The mocking smile has disappeared from their faces. They listen attentively to the glowing, inspiring words. They hear and feel the warmth in that stranger's preaching. They see the sympathetic look in his eyes. They realise that this preacher means what he says. And they are deeply moved when the preacher finally tells



George Whitefield 1714-1770 Wikipedia



George Whitefield, preaching outdoors. Painter: John Collet

them that Jesus Christ suffered unspeakably and even died for wretched sinners.

"But," continues the unknown speaker, "you must turn away from your sins and live a new life. You must repent, for eternal punishment in hell will be your destination if you continue to live in your sins."

Finally, the speaker stops, but he promises to come back.

Deeply impressed, the miners leave. This time, they do not go to the tavern to drown their misery with strong drink. During the next few days, they often discuss the message of that wonderful stranger. The next time he comes to speak, there are not two hundred but two *thousand* listeners! The news about this man spreads like wildfire through the entire region. Some time later, he comes to conduct another field service. This time, there is a crowd of *twenty thousand* to hear him! That great multitude listens breathlessly to every word he says. They can understand his words, and those words tell them something.

Who is that stranger concerned for those poor and ragged miners and factory workers and brings them the gospel?

His name is George Whitefield.

GEORGE'S YOUTH AND EDUCATION

George did not have a happy youth; on the contrary! His father had a tavern but died when George was only two. His mother continued the business, and young George helped her in the



Tavern life in the 19th Century. British School.



University of Oxford in the 19th century.
<https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/>

stuffy pub. As a child, he saw firsthand the rough life of those days. No wonder that he also lived a worldly life. George regularly visited the theatre. He witnessed many skirmishes where blood often flowed. As he grew up, he saw how the poor people lived. Without happiness, without joy, without God!

One day, he heard a sermon that deeply touched him. God used that sermon as a means to convert him. We realise that this meant that his entire life changed. He could no longer find pleasure in the things of this world. His biggest wish was to study theology. From now on, he wanted to spend his energy in the service of the Lord. He wanted to study, but he had no money. So he helped other students to support himself. He studied at the University of Oxford. There, he became acquainted with another student called John Wesley. John came from a large family - his mother had nineteen children. His father was a preacher in a small village and only earned a small stipend.

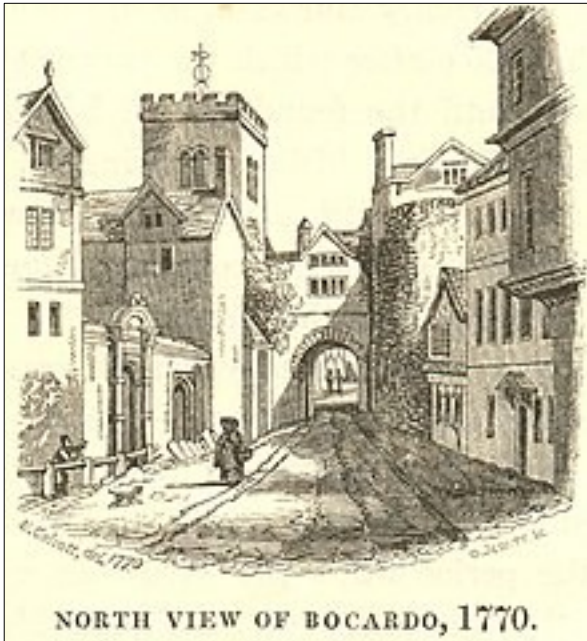
An older brother of John Wesley, named Charles, studied at the University of Oxford as well. These three students became close friends. They often visited each other.

Most of the students at Oxford lived wicked lives. They wasted their money on sinful pleasures and did not bother too much about studying. At Oxford, many served sin and the world.

But those three friends didn't. They started a club where other like-minded students could join them. That little group met every evening and

studied the Bible. Their example put many others to shame!

But they did even more! In their spare time, they visited sick people and nursed them. They even visited prisoners and sat with them in their musty cells to tell them about God and His service. In all



Whitefield visits Bocardo Prison. Engraving by N. Calcott.

their simplicity, they brought the gospel to those miserable people at the lowest point of their lives.

Their co-students mockingly called their club 'The Holy Club'. No way were they about to join *them!* They partied till the early hours and came home drunk at dawn.

'The Holy Club' took no notice of that mockery but continued their works of charity.

WESLEY AND WHITEFIELD



*John Wesley.
1703-1791.
Painter:
George Romney*

After finishing his studies at the University of Oxford, John Wesley travelled to North America. Since steamships did not exist yet, John travelled on a sailing vessel. A small group of Herrnhutters was also on that ship. As we know, they were the followers of von Zinzendorf, the Saxon count, who had lovingly

received the migrant Moravian Brethren and had allowed them to establish a colony on his estate.

That trip to North America lasted longer than they had expected. They had to deal with a severe storm, which tossed that little ship around like a leaf. Unceasingly, the enormous waves pounded the slender vessel, making all its joints creak. It got so bad that they all expected to die in a watery grave. John Wesley was terrified, but the Herrnhutters were very calm. They entrusted their life in the Lord's hands. John Wesley noticed that those Herrnhutters had something he lacked. *He* could not look death in the face as joyfully as these Herrnhutters! Their calm joy made him think. He felt drawn toward those plain, pious people.

Initially, he had planned to preach among the Indians, but since the various tribes were involved in a terrible war, that didn't happen. Instead, he preached among the whites who lived there. That labour bore rich fruits. In 1738 he returned to England. Yet he still felt unconverted, especially after becoming acquainted with the Herrnhutters. He later said that God converted him on May 24, 1738.

He and his brother Charles now became revivalist preachers. With much zeal, they sketched the horrors of hell to their listeners if they should die unconverted. But the appeal for repentance always followed - to repent, not *later*, but *now*, immediately.



Whitefield's Tabernacle, London. Whitefield used to preach on this corner for many years. At the time, there was only a wooden church building built in 1741. In 1868, this church replaced the wooden church. Wikipedia

He preached in the London churches, and the listeners crowded into those buildings. Not one seat remained unoccupied. The people stood in the aisles and even on the steps of the pulpit. They had never heard preaching like *that* before! They soaked up those penitential sermons like a dry sponge soaks up water and went home, deeply impressed. Neither the Wesley brothers nor George Whitefield intended to establish a separate church. Oh no, they preached in the churches of the English State Church. George Whitefield also travelled the country as a penitential preacher.

Since these preachers drew so many people and preached to packed churches, the other clergymen in the Anglican Church became envious, even jealous. Wesley and Whitefield preached so differently from them. Those Anglican ministers were content with their doctrine. They insisted on a respectable public, civilian life. But Wesley and Whitefield spoke about sin and grace. Their preaching breathed an entirely different spirit. The hostility of the Anglican Church erupted against those preachers of repentance. The

Anglican clergy forbade them from preaching in their churches, making it impossible for them to preach. The Anglican churches and pulpits were closed to them.

At first, John Wesley could not bring himself to preach in the open, and he hesitated, but Whitefield left for Bristol and on February 17, 1739, he preached in the open field for the first time. We just related that. He delivered his first sermon to about 200 listeners. At his second sermon, that number had increased to 2,000 listeners; the third time, he spoke to 20,000 people! Sure evidence that his preaching was effective!

When John Wesley heard what his friend Whitefield had done, he was frightened. No, no, we can't preach like that! He didn't want that! He travelled to Bristol to discuss it with his friend to persuade Whitefield to stop the field preaching.

But when he saw and heard how well Whitefield's preaching was received and the impression it made on those poor, neglected miners, his hesitation and doubt fell away, and he began to



*John Wesley, preaching from his father's tomb at Epworth.
Painter: George Brownlow.*

preach in the open air as well! He could serve the Kingdom of God even better like that! Now that the English State church buildings were closed to them, they preached everywhere. The people they could not otherwise reach, flocked from all sides, eager to hear their message.

The Wesley mottos became:

*"My calling is to save souls",
and
"The whole world is my parish."*

And that's what they practised. They preached in the marketplaces of the cities and towns. They preached in the open fields. They came where no other preachers came. They walked along the harbours of the many English seaports and preached on board the ships to rough sailors who at first stood listening to them with a mocking gleam in their eyes. They had never seen this happen before! Suspiciously, they sized up those strangers from top to toe. But their attitude often changed quite quickly. Then, the mocking sneer hovering on their lips disappeared and was replaced with deep emotion.

When the preachers pictured the terrors of hell before their eyes, their consciences made them feel very uncomfortable. But when the call to repentance followed, it caused many to think more deeply.

THE BEGINNING OF THE METHODISTS¹

These preachers of repentance always followed a fixed method of preaching. Therefore, their enemies mockingly called them **METHODISTS**. Whitefield and Wesley went to the hospitals and preached to the wounded and the sick. They visited the prisoners in their gloomy, stuffy cells. They tried to move criminals to repentance during the last moments of their lives when they were on their way to the gallows or the scaffold. They often walked next to them until they reached the place where the executioner would end the prisoner's life. Mockery, slander, contempt, and scorn were their portion, but they did not let it bother them.

¹ <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/who-was-john-wesley>



The brothers John (L) and Charles (R) Wesley.

John was the fifteenth and Charles was the eighteenth child in the family. Charles was a prolific hymnwriter who wrote more than 6500 hymns. *Christ the Lord is risen today; O, for a thousand tongues to sing; Ye servant of God; Hark, the herald angels sing*, are some of them. Both belonged to the Anglican church and were ordained as priests. Of the two, John was the more powerful preacher, and averaged 8000 miles of travel a year, mostly on horseback. In 1735, both of them sailed to America, Charles returned after one year. John returned in 1738. Wikipedia.

Tirelessly and unperturbed, they continued their task.

The Anglican clergy tried to make those open-air sermons impossible because they were a thorn in their flesh. *They* did not labour so much! *They* did not deem it worthy of so much trouble! They stirred up the people to disturb those gatherings.

Once, a man joined an enormous crowd. He had stones in his pocket with which he wanted to stone the preacher, John Wesley. However, he did not get the chance because the attentive audience wedged him in so tightly that he could not free his arms. He was forced to listen to the entire sermon, and it impressed him so much that he threw the stones away and joined the Methodists!

Even though they had many enemies who often humiliated and slandered them, thousands, even millions, joined the Methodists. They formed

small groups everywhere, regularly meeting to study and discuss a Bible chapter. At first, they stayed with the Anglican State Church because they did not want to establish their own church, but later, they saw the need to separate.

They established societies everywhere. Everyone who wanted to join received a membership card, which was valid for three months. If the members conducted themselves properly during those three months, they extended their membership for another three months.

John Wesley and his friend George Whitefield travelled to America and their preaching there was richly blessed. Hundreds of thousands, no, millions of North Americans joined the Methodists. Their influence has been enormous. For fifty-two years, John Wesley crisscrossed both England and North America. He often preached four times a day, sometimes to over thirty thousand listeners. Some tell us that Wesley preached more than forty thousand times.

And yet...

No matter how hard John Wesley worked and did his best, no matter how good his intentions were, a big "but" remained.

John Wesley forgot one crucial thing.

The centre of his preaching was man's conversion *as an act of man!* A man *had to* and *was able to* convert *himself!*

He did not preach that man was *dead in sin!* True, man *must* repent and be converted. That is God's covenant demand for all mankind, but... man *cannot* convert himself. That is part of his *guilt* before God. John Wesley forgot that *God* transforms a person through the Holy Spirit. The true conversion of man is not an act of man but an *act of God!* John Wesley preached conversion as an act of man. He believed man had a free will to do good. The foundation of John Wesley's preaching was wrong. He was a Remonstrant.

His friend, George Whitefield, was more Scriptural. He believed that God had elected a certain number of people to be saved. John Wesley did not believe that. In this, George Whitefield followed Calvin and Gomarus.

George Whitefield in America

George was a traveling evangelist during the Great Awakening in North America. He used a new preaching style and expressed the need for people to be 'born again'. He was the first man to travel up and down the east coast in North America, teaching and preaching in all thirteen colonies.

<https://americanheritage.org/>



Whitefield preached repentance and conversion as an act of *God!*

That was a huge difference between Wesley and Whitefield. Because of that, a split had to come among the Methodists.

The followers of John Wesley were called Wesleyans.

John Wesley believed in more errors. He taught that a person can live on earth perfectly, without sin. Whitefield disagreed with his friend Wesley on this too. Whitefield taught that man remains a sinner until his death.

A split also came with the Herrnhutters. They pointed only to the merits of Christ. John Wesley preached first repentance, then conversion and sanctification. All this must happen according to a fixed method.

Meanwhile, the number of followers of George Whitefield diminished. The number of Wesleyans increased. That was not surprising. Wesley taught that man was central and people like that. A salvation where man can still earn something

himself appeals to our sinful nature. But the infallible Word of God teaches something else! Scripture tells us that man, by nature, lives in deadly hostility toward God, and only the work of the Holy Spirit can renew the heart of a sinner. To be saved, God must change everybody from dead to alive. Not man, but God is central, first and last, even though man remains accountable for his deeds.

The *basis* of Wesleyanism was wrong; it was pure Arminianism.

True, they have done much good. They provided Bibles for distribution. They did an enormous amount of work to develop mission work. The Wesleyans and the Herrnhutters often set an example that was humiliating to other European Protestant churches.

In America, they did much for the poor negro slaves. Through their influence, the English government forbade slave trading in 1807. These were all good things. No one would deny that, but... all this flowed from their wrong belief that there was still some good left in man.

The Wesleyan Methodists' influence is still noticeable today; for example, the 'Salvation Army' originated from the Wesleyans.

QUESTIONS

1. How did prosperity affect religion in England?
2. Why weren't the poor interested in religion? How was their 'free time' spent?
3. What did the field preacher try to impress upon his hearers?
4. What impression did Whitefield leave on his hearers?
5. Summarise Whitefield's life before he became a field preacher.
6. Identify John Wesley.
7. What was the 'Holy Club' at Oxford? What work did they do?
8. What did Wesley learn from his contact with the Herrnhutters?
9. What is meant by a preacher of 'repentance'?
10. Describe the typical sermon of an Anglican preacher and compare it with the sermons of Wesley and Whitefield.
11. How were the Wesleys and Whitefield persecuted? What did Whitefield start doing?
12. Why were they called "Methodists"?
13. Explain the meaning of membership in their society.
14. Show the scope of the work of these men.
15. List the errors of Wesley regarding the following:
 - a. ability of man to convert himself
 - b. free will
 - c. election
 - d. sinless perfection on earth
 - e. the order of conversion
16. Did Whitefield agree with Wesley's errors?
17. List some of the good things the Wesleyans did.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read the letter of Whitefield to Wesley in which he warned his friend about the Arminian errors he had adopted.
<https://www.monergism.com/whitefields-letter-wesley-election-ebook>
 - a) Show how Whitefield tries to reason with his friend regarding one of these errors.
 - b) How did Whitefield regard Wesley's state for eternity? What does he say about Wesley entering heaven?

REJOICE, the LORD is King!
Your LORD and King adore,
Mortals, give Thanks and sing,
And triumph evermore;
Lift up your Heart,
lift up your Voice,
Rejoice, again, I say, rejoice.

JESUS, the Saviour reigns,
The GOD of Truth and Love,
When He had purg'd our Stains,
He took his Seat above:
Lift up your Heart,
lift up your Voice,
Rejoice, again, I say, rejoice.

Charles Wesley