John Wesley's Years in Georgia

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John Wesley set sail from England on October 14, 1735, for the Colony of Georgia, founded and governed by General Oglethorpe under the direction of a Board of Trustees, resident in England. He returned to his native land on February 1, 1738. Mr. Wesley landed at Tybee on February 6, 1736, and fled Savannah, never to return, for Charleston, South Carolina, on December 2, 1737, thence sailing for home twenty days later on December 22. His entire absence from his native land on this his only trans-Atlantic journey was two years, three months, and seventeen days. His actual residence in the Colony of Georgia was no more than one year, nine months, and twenty-seven days. His laconic comment about it all was: "It is now almost two years and four months since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgia Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, what I least of all suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God." (Journal, Sunday, January 29, 1738.)

The biography of Wesley is one thing. The history of Methodism is quite another. Yet the two are related, not like parent to child as we so often suppose, but more like an older brother to younger members of the same family, for Methodism did not spring from the work of Mr. Wesley after that work had already been accomplished, nor was it the projection in institutional form of his peculiar, perhaps even eccentric, personality. Methodism emerged and developed simultaneously with Wesley's own mature and developing life. The work he did at the time he did it constituted, piece-meal, or block by block, the remarkable structure which came to be called The Methodist Church. Yet each block had to be chiseled, cut down, smoothed over, and made to fit into place. The process of doing this reacted almost as much on Mr. Wesley as he on it, for what he advised, others tested; and his counsels always underwent the rigorous criticism of experimentation. He adopted field preaching, for example, against his will. The use of lay preachers was not to his personal taste, but the exigencies of a practical situation demanded it. Even an annual conference with his ministers was called forth by events, and to the end he considered it an advisory body whose findings were recommendations which he could take or leave at will.
If we assume that Aldersgate, May 24, 1738, was his spiritual birthday, then it follows, too, that this date was the real beginning of the revival, for before that time Wesley had had no success as a preacher, and after that time everywhere he turned souls were converted to the Lord. But are we to assume as well that this date marks the establishment of The Methodist Church? As an evangelistic enterprise, yes; as a movement of spiritual renewal across England and later America, indubitably; for the organizational actions of 1784 were but the long delayed recognition of an ecclesiastical power, the first force of which was exerted through the grace of God in 1738.

This means of course that the Georgia Expedition of 1736-37 was, as a missionary and evangelistic enterprise, a failure, so glaring and so convincingly real that it disturbed the emotional balance of Mr. Wesley's own personal life. These Georgia years, in spiritual kind and even in abiding results, were of the same cloth as the Oxford years, so that the same indictment which falls on them likewise falls on the times of the Holy Club and the pietistic labors of the young don of Lincoln College before he pulled up roots and sailed to the New World. The death of William Morgan was more than a personal tragedy. It was the focal point of a spiritual era the scene of which shifted from Oxford to Savannah. There was nothing then that Wesley and his associates would not do for the health and security of their own souls. Other souls and the religious and moral aid they were able to afford them existed as no more than ways and means to improve their own. "Our end in leaving our native country was not to avoid want, God having given us plenty of temporal blessings, nor to gain riches or honour, (which we trust He will ever enable us to look as no other than dung and dross;) but simply this—to save our souls, to live wholly to the glory of God." (Journal, October 14, 1735.)

But men are not commodities to be bought for gain, even though the market be a religious market. Free human beings will not respond even to the gospel if they think the gospel is given to them for ulterior reasons. An immortal soul does not exist as a mere means of improving another immortal soul. The motive of trying to save others only in order thereby to save one's self is an unworthy motive and rings counterfeit and cheap on any honorable exchange.

The tendency of foreign peoples to interpret missions as an aspect of the importation of Western civilization into their lands has hindered and impeded the progress of the missionary movement. The nineteenth-century picture, which today is caricatured under the label of what was no doubt a well-intentioned but none the less most unfortunate phrase "the White Man's Burden," lingers on to harass and embarrass us in all that we try to do in the twentieth
century. We appear too often to others to recommend ourselves and our customs and to buy our influence with money rather than to proclaim Jesus Christ and to offer ourselves on a cross that his divine influence might prevail.

Mr. Wesley’s comment about Miss Sophy Hopkey was really a comment about himself when he affirmed of her in the early days of his courtship that she had “no desire either to see or be seen, unless in order to be wiser and better.” (Journal, Nov. 1, 1736.)

This was his attitude in all his doings. It is no wonder that his ministry in Georgia seemed more like ecclesiastical exhibitionism than an honest endeavor to better the lives of those entrusted to his care. One of his parishioners said openly to his face: “I like nothing you do. All your sermons are satires upon particular persons, therefore, I will never hear you more; and all of the people are of my mind, for we won’t hear ourselves abused.

“Besides, they say they are Protestants. But as for you, they cannot tell what religion you are of. They never heard of such religion before. And then your private behaviour—all the quarrels that have been here since you came have been long of you. Indeed, there is neither man nor woman in the town who minds a word you say. And so you may preach long enough; but nobody will come to hear you.” (Journal, June 22, 1763, Curnock Edition, I, 234.)

Wesley’s reaction was typical of one who in his own opinion could do no wrong. The blame was with the accusers, not with the accused. Said he, “If, therefore striving to do good, you have done hurt, what then? So did Saint Paul. So did the Lord of life. Even his word was ‘the savour of death’ as well as ‘the savour of life.’” (Journal, June 23, 1736.)

So Curnock in summarizing the diary that underlay the Second Savannah Journal for Friday, May 14, 1736, notes that Mr. Wesley’s expression concerning an interview he had with Mr. and Mrs. Dean is that each “got a little good” out of what he said to them. This expression is typical of Wesley’s accounts of his pastoral conversations. Then, Curnock wisely adds: “Just as his projected mission to the Indians was undertaken in the first instance ‘to save his own soul,’ so his attempts to save colonists parishioners has for its ultimate motive the good he can get to his own soul. At a later period his chief concern was to do all the good he could: his present concern is to get all the good he can.” (Journal, Curnock Edition, I, 217.)

He refused to baptize the Parker child because Mr. and Mrs. Parker would neither consent to have it dipped nor certify the child was too weak to have water poured on it. (Journal, May 5, 1736, Curnock Edition, I, 210-11.) This rigid requirement Wesley adopted from the first Edwardian Prayer Book of 1548. It was not the rubric
of the Prayer Book of 1662 under which the Church of England of the eighteenth century was governed. Mr. Wesley felt in this instance the earlier prayer book was nearer to New Testament practice than the later. This self-righteous priest was willing to deny baptismal regeneration, in which he then firmly believed, to a little child rather than modify his private principles or liturgical practice. Here his own opinion took precedence over the accepted practices of the Church.

In my judgment, it is indisputable that Wesley’s labors as a missionary and evangelist prior to his Aldersgate experience were on the whole ineffectual and futile, and that his experiences in Georgia, unalleviated as were the Oxford years by pleasures and profitable pursuits in other areas of endeavor, brought to him by their sheer monotony, the crushing and devastating realization that he did not have what it took to serve God and to fulfill the ideals of his calling.

Yet there are other aspects of the life of a church besides missions and evangelism. Though it is true that without them nothing else counts at all, still the body of Christ, powerful through evangelism and expanding and increasing by means of missions, is hardly complete if its congregational life is deprived of the means of daily spiritual nourishment not included within the range either of evangelism or missions. Could it be that the Georgia years, barren and wasteful though they were by Wesley’s failure in these two great particulars, were none the less profitable in other ways, the good of which was to appear later after Wesley had been launched in his crusade of successful evangelistic preaching? Perhaps he learned things in Georgia the value of which he was then unable to discern but later years were to confirm as indispensable to his work.

Curnock says of Charles Wesley that he “accomplished nothing by going to Georgia. He lost rather than gained—learned nothing, did nothing. With the best intentions he hindered rather than helped. ... Georgia did nothing for Charles except ruin his health, and he did nothing for Georgia until long after he had left never to return.” (Journal, Curnock Edition, I, 253.)

This is a severe indictment, but I think the facts bear it out. It applies only to Charles, however. It does not apply to John. The Georgia years helped to frame later Methodism. In fact, their influence came to be overwhelming. From the date of 1736-37, let us establish the particulars which prove that this assertion is true.

First of all, Mr. Wesley started in Georgia his careful investigation of the history of the Early Church and began to form those opinions which in later years became the convictions that enabled him to found the American Methodist Church independent of the Church of England. The seed that grew in 1784 into a mighty new ecclesiastical tree the branches of which would eventually shade arid and
sun-baked regions around the world was planted in fertile soil of John Wesley’s soul in Georgia in 1736. Nearly half a century of watering was necessary for its growth.

On Sunday, February 22, 1736, he baptized Mary Welch, aged eleven days, by immersion, basing his action on the customary practice of the New Testament Church, observing that even the most ancient fonts in English churches were designed for immersion. (Journal, Curnock Edition, I, 166-67.) He lived at intervals with Germans and watched their day-by-day behavior, saw with his own eyes the simplicity of the communal life, so like the days of the Apostles, “for they walked worthy of the vocation wherewith they were called, and adorned the gospel of the Lord in all things.” It was Spangenberg, who on Friday, February 27, opened Mr. Wesley’s eyes to the untenability of the doctrine of Apostolic succession. (Ibid, 168-69.) Wesley witnessed the ordination by the Moravians of a bishop whom they themselves had elected. In fact, he was present for the balloting. “The great simplicity, as well as solemnity, of the whole, almost made me forget the seventeen hundred years between, and imagine myself in one of those assemblies where form and state were not, but Paul the tentmaker or Peter the fisherman presided, yet with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” (Journal, Feb. 28, 1736.)

He reached a judgment as to what the Lord’s Supper really is, namely, a Communion, or fellowship, with the Risen Saviour and a sacramental thanksgiving. (Journal, Curnock Edition, I, 209.)

At this period it seems he lived, without trying to reconcile the two, a double life: one was English, legalistic, strictly Anglican; the other was German, Moravian, pietistic. (Ibid, 212.) The two would be resolved later by the teaching of the New Testament.

One book especially had an over-mastering effect on Mr. Wesley’s ecclesiology. He began to read it aloud with Mr. Delamotte on September 13, 1736; it was William Beveridge’s Pandectae Canonum Conciliorum. “Nothing could so effectually have convinced us that both Particular and ‘General Councils may err and have erred;’ (and of the infinite difference there is between the decisions of the wisest men and of the Holy Ghost recorded in His Word;) and that things ordained by Councils as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority unless they be taken out of Holy Scripture.” (Journal, September 13, 1736.) What Wesley learned from his studies in Georgia prepared him to follow his own personal understanding of the New Testament to the point of disregarding ecclesiastical tradition and the teaching of his own church on rites, orders, and ceremonies and therefore creating in keeping with his own conviction an entirely new denomination in the Family of God.
Secondly, the structure of the later United Societies was at least in its basic pattern conceived in Georgia. It was the result of the normal desire of a conscientious pastor to care properly for the people entrusted to him.

Wesley had been in Georgia only three months and four days when he wrote: “I began visiting my parishioners in order, from house to house, for which I set apart the time when they cannot work, because of the heat, viz., from twelve till three in the afternoon. (Journal, May 10, 1736.)

Later Wesley began to organize his people into smaller groups. His first thought was that such groups, consisting of regular communicants, should meet every day after evening prayers and every Sunday afternoon. This proved too often even for people who had as little to do as the colonists of Georgia, so Wesley modified the time to Wednesdays and Fridays, which were the fast days of the Apostolic Church. (Journal, Curnock Edition, I, 230.)

In the minds of some, Wesley was too careful about managing the lives of his people, tried to know them too well, and kept too close a watch over their doings. Complained one angry man, Mr. Wesley “was always prying into other peoples' concerns, in order to set them together by the ears;” that he “had betrayed everyone who had trusted” him and had even “revealed the confessions of dying men.” (Journal, August 21, 1736.)

This of course is an exaggeration, yet it illustrates the opposite of what it intends, namely, that Wesley realized a good pastor belongs with his people and that his labors among them, if they are to count at all, must be organized and arranged to reach a definite goal.

It is probable that the plan for societies and bands was first worked out by Mr. Wesley on Easter Sunday, April 25, 1736, amended and improved on May 2, in consultation with his Moravian friends. Twenty or thirty persons met at his home in Savannah, where they resolved to talk together freely about religion, beginning and ending their meeting with singing and prayer. (Journal, Curnock Edition, I, 178.) This was not, in my judgment, the revivifying of the Oxford Club. It consisted of a group of students. This consisted of German and English colonists. It was a piece of the world, which anticipated the organization of the future, an organization that would conserve the fruits of the revival.

Finally, the Methodist Hymn Book itself was the product of Wesley’s Georgia years.

In 1736 it is doubtful that the Church of England herself had a regular hymn book. She had two metrical versions of the Psalms and Jeremy Taylor’s Golden Grove and George Herbert’s Temple.
But Wesley heard congregational singing as he had never heard it before when he visited the services of the Moravians. He coveted this experience for his own people. He organized his companions around their songs. He believed that as people learned to sing together they would learn to love one another and work together for the glory of God.

At this time, so far as we know, Charles had not written a single hymn. Hymnody was the bequest of the Holy Spirit to him on his conversion. John, therefore, with far less poetic and musical talent led the way for Charles. He translated out of the German some great hymns for the English people. Indeed, he learned German on board ship crossing the Atlantic to Georgia for the express purpose of putting it to use. The first use he made of it was in translating hymns.

His first hymn book was published in the New World. It was published at Charleston, South Carolina, in the year 1736 and bore the title, *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*. The division of the Hymn Book is threefold: (1) Psalms and Hymns for Sunday, (2) Psalms and Hymns for Wednesday or Friday, and (3) Psalms and Hymns for Saturday. The hymns for Wednesday or Friday are largely penitential and confessional.

Thus the Georgia years were not wasteful. Seeds were sown that needed but the spiritual watering of Aldersgate to be brought to maturity and strength. This stanza from the Charleston Hymn Book, a stanza presumably composed by Wesley himself, voices a prayer which God ultimately answered so abundantly in his life and ministry:

Guide Thou, my Lord, guide Thou my course,
And draw me on with Thy sweet face.
Still make me walk, still make me tend
By Thee my Way, to Thee my End.