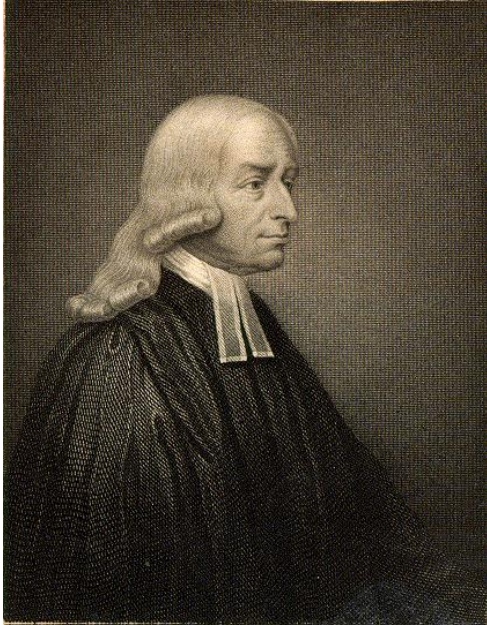


# Preface

In 1988 I read a book entitled *Strangely Warmed* by Garth Lean. The subtitle is, *The Amazing Life of John Wesley*. That was no exaggeration. In seminary I read plenty of books about Wesley, but none that flowed like a thrilling novel. Lean's book did. As I read, several thoughts kept returning to mind. I was repeatedly amazed how greatly Wesley suffered for doing good, and much at the hands of upstanding church people! I was also impressed by his reaction. He was impervious. It never daunted him and he never shrank from it. Attacks that would have demolished my ego didn't faze John Wesley. When a mindless, raging band of thugs would try to break up one of his preaching services, he would step down from the pulpit, walk straight into their midst and to the gang leader, stare him in the eye (which usually meant looking up. He stood barely over five feet tall!) and say, "Hello. My name is John Wesley. Have I harmed you in any way of which I am not aware?" Almost always the bully would shrink in intimidation, and often was converted on the spot! Wesley even learned to use persecution to his advantage. He never lapsed into bitterness and never gave up, even though 20 years after he began his great movement it lay in ruins, all his helpers having abandoned him. Still, he pressed on.

John Wesley was an amazing steward of time, extracting the most from every minute. He always rose at four a.m. and went to bed at 11 p.m., yet never failed to devote the first and last hours of each day to prayer. In spite of



unfathomable opposition and hardship from within the church and without—not to mention problems with health, weather, finances and countless other hindrances—he pressed on toward his goal: winning the world for Christ.

John Wesley was balanced. Today, it seems, we have groups over on one end of the theological spectrum that consider themselves authentically Wesleyan because they hold to the authority of the Bible and believe that individuals must be born again. In the other corner are folks who think inclusively and actively engage in social ministries, who equally believe themselves authentically Wesleyan. Each group looks at its own virtues and at the others' apparent omissions, and to outsiders we must appear

like the Sadducees and Pharisees, arms folded, proud of ourselves, backs to one another, yet each with only partial truth and all oblivious to our faults. John Wesley was strong in his personal convictions that the Bible is the authentic Word of God, and we are not to compromise it. He required personal upright moral behavior, and would kick out any Methodist who tried to make the Bible say something it didn't. At the same time he was always up to his elbows in meeting social needs and attacking social evils. Strong biblical convictions, insistence on personal morality and constant involvement in meeting social needs. He was simultaneously "liberal" and "conservative" in all the right ways. In whom have we ever seen a better balance? We can all learn from John Wesley.

As I read Lean's book, two uncomfortable questions repeatedly crossed my consciousness: "Why am I not like that?" and "Why is my church not like that?" No satisfactory answers—though lots of excuses—came to mind. We are a pale shadow of what we used to be...what we were meant to be. The more I read about Wesley's arrogant, inert and impotent Anglican Church, the more I recognized similarities in us. I was convicted of my own sin. It seems almost that an unspoken covenant exists among us: I won't acknowledge your mediocrity if you won't acknowledge mine. John Wesley blows that fog away.

When we finish a good book, we want others to be inspired as we were. I have asked many United Methodists if they knew the story of John Wesley. Few said they did. Some had participated in studies here and there, but most remembered only isolated facts, and some fiction: He was rescued from a fire. His heart was strangely warmed at Aldersgate (or was it at Asbury?). His brother Charles wrote hymns. His mother was named Susannah. Little more. The thought occurred to me that we have many good, comprehensive studies on the Bible, such as *The Bethel Series* and *Disciple*, but nothing comparative on our Methodist heritage...nothing comprehensive, in everyday vocabulary, with a prescribed course of action at the end.

My decision to write this came in 1999 during a meeting of our annual conference Commission on Finance and Administration, where we discussed dwindling giving patterns, and tried to decide what to do. Afterwards I talked with my bishop, sharing my conviction that people give to causes in which they deeply believe, and how we ought to reeducate our churches on the inspiring story of John Wesley. I told him someone ought to put together such a study, and he said, "Go ahead!" Thus, in good United Methodist tradition, the one who came up with the idea ended up chairing the committee! Here is the result: *The John Wesley Academy*.

This is divided into 21 weekly lessons, to be studied and discussed by a small group in your church whose members are serious about discipleship, and who want to return to true wesleyanism. I have tried to include many vignettes and interesting stories, but much of it, unavoidably, is history and theology. I

disliked history in public school and theology in seminary, so I have tried to write in understandable words and language that will be clear to an average high school student. I use theological terminology and church jargon as little as possible. Also, I avoid using *hot* terms such as *liberal*, *evangelical* and *charismatic*. When people use words like those we subconsciously jump to conclusions and cloud communication. Also, we preachers tend to presume that just because we understand what terms like *hermeneutics* and *exegesis* mean, everybody should. One of Wesley's goals was stating eternal truth in the "vulgar," or the language of everyday people. In his spirit I have tried to do the same.

Generally, I try to write without gender bias. At least I try to write in gender-fairness, though I will not be a slave to that rule. I have tried to eliminate the old-fashioned usage of the male pronoun unless I'm writing about males. In some narratives, though, never using "he" can be awkward, so you who are passionate about that, forgive me if an occasional generic "he" offends you. But please get past that. We have more important things to worry about. In some places I have even sneaked in the generic "she." I don't care how many people say it is: "They" is not singular. So, as long as my mother the former English teacher is alive, I refuse to say, "If somebody wants to, they should!" Call me old fashioned. I believe usage of the male gender for The Almighty is scriptural and therefore proper, so for that I make no apology. Yes, God has motherly qualities. But Jesus never referred to God as His Heavenly Mother, so neither shall I. I doubt that anyone will be harmed because of it.

After you have completed the 21 Sessions we will take a break for a few weeks, then reconvene to put into practice some Wesleyan ministries and disciplines like the ones of which we have read. So please take notes and write down ideas and dreams of what good we can do in our communities this time next year, in Stage II: *The John Wesley Adventure*.

As you discover Wesley's people-winning principles, please discuss these and apply them to our situations today. When you get ideas on how these Sessions may be improved, share them with me. Your corrections may be included in the next printing of the *Academy*. If, in your personal studies, you come across great quotes or stories that would fit into the studies, by all means send them to me. If they are unique I will give you credit. Though I have used the best sources I know of, and have tried to be faithful to history, some of this may still be inaccurate. The story of John Wesley has been told with many variations, and history books do not agree on everything. If you know parts of this story to be more accurate than the way I have told them, and you can point to better sources, I will appreciate and welcome your direction.

For those of you who wish to embark on a thrilling journey—  
simultaneously into our past and into our future—saddle up and let's go!