

Session 7:

John Wesley the Man

A personal acquaintance knows a man far better than one who has simply read or heard about him. We can nearly “get to know” John Wesley since so many of his contemporaries wrote down their impressions of him.

His Appearance

Wesley weighed 122 pounds. One biographer called him “a human gamecock.” He was 5’ 3”, and “striking” in appearance. In 1743, when he was accosted in a riot near Wednesbury, two rival gangs fought over which one had the right to kill him. However, he escaped having received only two blows which did not hurt at all. John credited angels for protecting him. Charles, however, suggested a more practical explanation: “Many blows he escaped through his lowness of stature.”¹ John could drop to sleep almost on command, and once commented that he had not lost a night’s rest in 70 years.



In a time when the prevailing fashion dictated wearing wigs, he chose to grow his hair long, a choice he first made back at Oxford when he could not afford a wig. He had a prominent nose, firm jaw line and piercing blue eyes. He was immaculately neat. One who knew Wesley in his later years described him this way. He had...

...A clear, smooth forehead, an aquiline nose, an eye the brightest and the most piercing that can be conceived, and a freshness of complexion, scarcely ever to be found at his year, and expressive of the most perfect health. In his countenance and demeanor, there was a cheerfulness mingled with gravity; a sprightliness, which was the natural result of an unusual flow of spirits. His aspect, particularly in profile, had a strong character of acuteness and penetration...A narrow, plaited stock, a coat with small upright collar, no buckles at his knees, no silk or velvet in any part of his apparel, and a head as white as snow, gave an idea of something

primitive and apostolical; while an air of neatness and cleanliness diffused over his whole person.²

Wesley's appearance represented his life in general. He was methodical, frugal, industrious, and possessed almost limitless stamina.

His Countenance

Some ingredients of great leadership are virtually indescribable. Back in the Holy Club a man John Gambold described John's spiritual calm and confidence:

I have seen him come out of his closet with a serenity of countenance, which was next to shining...always cheerful, but never triumphing, he so husbanded the secret consolations which God gave him, that they seldom left him. He used many arts to be religious, but none to seem so.³

Many who heard John Wesley preach, or who merely stood in his presence, commented upon his almost mystically powerful countenance. John Nelson, a hulking stonemason who became one of Wesley's most effective lay preachers, described from his own memory how he felt upon first hearing Wesley:



As soon as he got upon the stand he stroked back his hair and turned his face towards where I stood, and I thought he fixed his eyes on me. His countenance struck such an awful dread upon me before I heard him speak that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock, and when he did speak I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me. When he had done I said, "This man can tell the secrets of my heart."⁴

His Courage

Except for the disapproval of The Almighty, John Wesley seemed unafraid of anything or anybody. The more good he did the more abuse he suffered, yet he never winced. After

one attack he wrote, “God brought me safe to Wednesbury, having lost only one flap of my waistcoat, and a little skin from one of my hands.” Wesley suffered hundreds of such assaults. When his army of lay helpers began preaching and getting the same treatment, he ordered them, “Always look a mob in the eye.” and then he set the example personally.

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (II Tim. 4:2-5)

Not only was Wesley unafraid of physical violence, he was equally fearless in the face of political and ecclesiastical persecution. Truly Wesley preached “in season and out.” He cared nothing about whether an issue was politically correct or incorrect. His only concern was: Is it right or wrong? If it was wrong, if it harmed people, he stood against it even if every powerful person in England stood for it! For example, slavery was legal and many wealthy, powerful Anglicans owned slaves. Publicly he condemned it as an evil practice. When proponents cried that slavery was necessary in the West Indies because whites were unable to work in that hot climate, Wesley replied, “It were better that all those islands were altogether sunk in the depth of the sea than that they should be cultivated at so high a price as the violation of justice, mercy, and truth.” Fighting words! Slavery, many claimed, was necessary to England’s economy. Wesley countered, “Better no trade than trade procured by villainy... Better is honest poverty than all the riches brought by the tears, and sweat, and blood of our fellow creatures.”

In a time when England was claiming great military conquests in India and America, Wesley publicly opposed war.⁵ He attacked political inequities, such as the fact that only 5% of English men, mostly the wealthy, could legally vote. He wrote, “By what right do you exclude a man from being one of the people because he has not forty shillings a year? Is he not a man, whether he be rich or poor? Has he not a soul and a body?” He bravely advocated women’s right to vote. He stood against bribery at elections, urging citizens to vote “without fee or reward for the person they judged most worthy.” Wesley relentlessly attacked popular vices of all sorts, from dueling to disrespect for the Sabbath and the use of profanity. He fought against liquor trafficking and most forms of alcohol use. Up until relatively recently, Methodism publicly stood for abstinence from alcohol because it kills the will, destroys character, incentive and family life, and the world would be a