

The elusive Mr. Wesley

Prayer

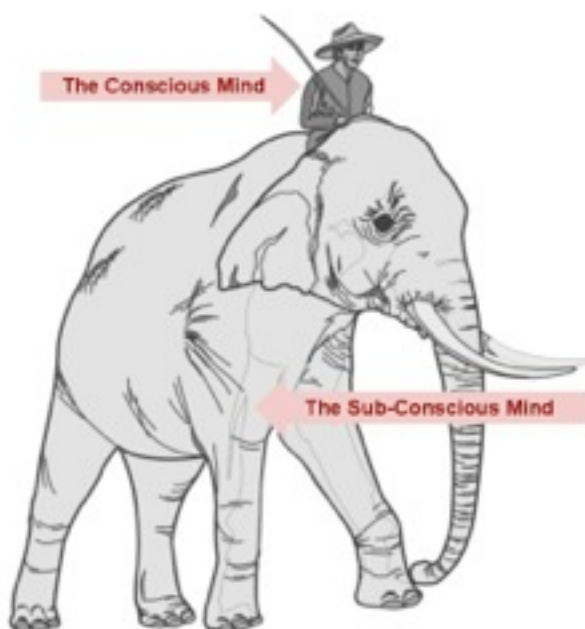
O God, keep our whole country under your protection. Wipe out sin from this land; lift it up from the depth of sorrow, O Lord, our Shining Light. Save us from deep grief and misfortune, Lord of all nations. Bless us with your wisdom, so that the poor may not be oppressed, and the rich may not be oppressors. Make this a nation having no ruler except God, a nation having no authority but that of Love. Amen.

Toyohiko Kagawa, Japan, 20th century (UM Hymnal #429)

Focus of three sessions

1. Describe briefly the muddle we find ourselves in, and suggest that Wesleyan history and practice are a good place in which to ground our faith journey. Introduce you to the man John Wesley, if I can find him.
2. Talk about the bedrock of Wesleyan theology — the three kinds of grace — and a discussion of a controversial concept these days — the Quadrilateral. Show the pros and cons of Wesleyan theology in the context of our current muddle.
3. Describe how we got to where we are — show how we are a product of our Wesleyan genes and history. In other words, try and go deeper, and, in the end, have a greater understanding and appreciation of John Wesley and Methodism. So let's jump right in.

The Muddle



We are *polarized*: red state-blue state; left vs right; conservative-progressive. We seem to argue past each other most of the time. Why can't we seem to communicate with each other? **The Righteous Mind**, by Jonathan Haidt, suggest some answers.

Haidt asked the question, “when we make values decisions, do we respond first with our mind — and those values we learned in church and at home — or do we respond with our emotions and subconscious?” His research concluded that we mostly respond first with our subconscious and then justify our decision with our rational mind. His simile is that of an elephant and the driver: the elephant decides which path to take, and then the

driver proceeds to justify the decision. In other words, our “drivers” are talking to each other, but our “elephants” are not communicating, and have already made up their minds anyway. See also Haidt’s home page: <http://people.stern.nyu.edu/jhaidt/>, and <http://www.moralfoundations.org>

- Carol Tavris’ book, **Mistakes Were Made — but not by me**, details how subjectivity influences our opinions, even the opinions of judges, medical doctors, scientists of all disciplines — folks who are paid to be objective.

- We are *post-modern* — church institutions are unimportant. “Religion is just another hobby: quiet, private, trivial— not fit for intelligent, public-spirited adults.” — *The Culture of Disbelief* by Stephen L. Carter, 1994



- We are *consumers*. Spirituality is something to be consumed. It’s sometimes called “cafeteria spirituality.” People pick and choose the parts of religions and theology that they like and reject the rest. My guess is that they often pick the easiest parts. We’ll talk next week about how we “cafeteria-ize” our beloved Quadrilateral.

Wesleyan theology gives us a beginning of a foundation for dealing with these questions in a polarized, post-modern and consumer world.

What is a Methodist? And who is John Wesley?

- a born-again evangelical or a social reformer?
- high church worshipper or a fervent free church worshipper?
- River Oaks or Fifth Ward?

The answer to these questions is, “yes.” Richard Heitzenrater called his two books on John Wesley, “The Elusive Mr. Wesley.” (Heitzenrater is best known for decoding the personal journals of John Wesley, a task that others couldn’t accomplish for nearly 200 years.)

Here's what Dr. Heitzenrater says in **The Elusive Mr. Wesley**:

1. *John Wesley was a legend in his own time.* He was famous as an evangelist, social reformer, author.

He was also a self-promoter. One time Wesley was attacked by a mob with sticks while he was preaching in a village square. He got down from his platform and simply walked to safety between the men who came to harm him. He later wrote that “the Lord parted the crowd like the Red Sea and I was able to escape on dry ground.” However someone else was there. He wrote that “John Wesley was so short that the men couldn't hit him with their sticks, and he walked out between them.”



2. *His legend has grown.* Today, many quotes are ascribed to John Wesley, and many are wrong or at least inaccurate. The internet compounds the errors because anything that's on the internet is a) accepted as true, and b) quoted by everyone else. Now for a quiz.
3. Did Wesley say:
 - In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity. *No.* He was quoting Augustine, who lived 1300 years earlier.
 - Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Not exactly. He wrote the first two but not the third.
 - The Wesley Quadrilateral? *No.* Albert Outler coined the concept in the 1950s.
 - Cleanliness is next to godliness. *Yes!* Wesley did coin that phrase.
4. *He was different in public than in private. (and how many of us are not?)* Publicly John Wesley was enthusiastic about his Aldersgate conversion; privately he continued to have doubts and anxiety about the state of his soul, even after Aldersgate. I'd say that was a reflection of his neuroses, not his theology.
5. *He was controversial.* During his lifetime, religious leaders attacked Wesley from the left and from the right. If he was attacked from the left, he defended his position from the right; if he was attacked from the right, he defended himself from the left. Consequently, today both conservatives and progressives can find support for their beliefs based on John Wesley. Which they do.
6. He was a *reconciling theologian*, in the tradition of the Church of England. He held positions which are not easily held together or reconciled. So he is labeled “a quiet revolutionary,” “a radical conservative” or a “romantic realist.” No wonder people reached opposite conclusions about who Wesley was.

To get to the “reconciling” part, we have to jump back to the English Reformation. The 1500s and 1600s were almost continuous centuries of warfare and bloodshed between Protestants and Catholics. You may remember “Bloody Mary,” who fought to reestablish Catholicism in Great Britain. Oliver Cromwell was a Puritan leader, and got rid of the monarchy around 1650. He also outlawed entertainment. Blood was shed on all sides.

In the end England was Protestant, but barely so. The worship style was similar to that of Rome, including the use of Latin, in some cases. Thus, Anglicans were eager to put the bloodshed behind them and became “reconciling theologians” — eager to reconcile different points of view — sometimes points of view that were even contradictory. The British church came to be called the “Church of England” and loyalty was primarily to the Crown.

John Wesley grew up in that tradition and his theology shows it. He was a “both-and” theologian. He preached a whole sermon on the idea, “if your heart is as my heart, then give me your hand.” Dogma isn’t irrelevant, but what’s in your heart is more important. [This drives systematic theologians nuts.]

7. We Methodists continue in that “both-and” tradition. In 1968 the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Each had its own statement of faith. Rather than examine and rewrite the two into one coherent creed, the committee just put them side-by-side, saying, in effect, “Take your pick. They’re roughly the same anyway.” We too, tend to be “reconciling” theologians. Dogma is less important than, say, actions, or where your loyalties are.
8. *He changed his mind. Wesley didn’t hold the same opinions his whole life! Have you?* A student once asked a lecturer on John Wesley, “how old was Wesley?” The professor reflected for a moment and then said, “well, you see, he was different ages at different times.” In 1725, at Oxford, he described himself as a non-Christian. But in 1775 he allowed that he probably was a Christian at Oxford.

Interpreting John Wesley is like interpreting the Bible — you can find pretty much what you are looking for. It also depends on *your* context — where you are standing on this blue marble we call earth.

Salient facts about John Wesley

- **CONTEXT:** Wesley’s context includes the century in which he was born. (He lived from 1703 to 1791.) During this time the world saw The Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, and aftermath of that bloody English

Reformation. These factors all formed the John Wesley we know, and are trying to understand.

- **FATHER:** John was the son of Samuel Wesley, former Dissenter who later served as Rector in several parishes, notably, Epworth, where John and Charles were born. Samuel was later a Tory, as were John and Charles (loyal to king and the Church of England). Samuel and Susannah had 18 children (and lived to tell the tale).
- **MOTHER:** John was also the son of Susannah Wesley, reputed to be a formidable intellect with very high expectations for hard work, scholarship and spirituality. Susannah led some prayer groups for period of time while Samuel was away. Attendance grew and she was then prohibited from continuing by her husband. So we have a non-conformist father and a demanding mother. Two tough people to please.
- **OXFORD YEARS:** John and Charles attended Oxford where they set up a “holy club.” Practices included hours of scripture reading and prayer, regular communion and worship, and giving alms to the poor. The group had such a strict daily spiritual schedule they were derided as “Methodists,” as if there were a method for salvation. [John’s striving for personal and spiritual perfection inspired *me* to lose weight and take up jogging in my 40s.]
- **MISSIONARIES:** Both John and Charles were spectacular failures as missionaries to the American colonies. In his 30s, John returned to England depressed and anxious.
- **MORAVIANS:** Contacts with Moravians led to John’s evangelical conversion, also called John’s “Aldersgate experience,” after the location of the meeting where he had his “warm-hearted” experience. The warm-hearted thread in Methodism continues strongly in the U.S. to this day. Was John Wesley evangelical or was he high-church? The answer is yes.
- **THE FIRST BILLY GRAHAM:** He preached to the underclasses. John was invited by another evangelical preacher, George Whitfield, to preach outdoors, to peasants, miners, and those whom the Church of England stayed away from and kept from their doors. This, in my opinion, was perhaps the most radical thing



John Wesley did. He then had spectacular success as evangelist from his mid-30s to his death — nearly 50 years.

- **ORGANIZER:** He had a penchant for organization, which led to growth of “societies” which led to the organization of lay preachers, who became “circuit riders.” The American church grew to over 200,000 persons by 1800, shortly after his death. The believers were labeled “Methodists.”

John Wesley’s accomplishments

John Wesley traveled at least 4,500 miles a year every year for 50 years. That’s 225,000 miles either by foot, horseback, or horse-drawn wagon. He had the wagon equipped with bookshelves and a writing desk so he could study and write during his trips.

He preached over 42,000 sermons during this time (or, 50 sermons 42,000 times), averaging about 15 a week.

Wesley wrote and published 441 items, ranging from a four-page tract to his three-volume Commentary on the Old Testament.

Although Wesley made quite a bit of money during his lifetime through his publications, he continued to live on the barest minimum possible. One accurate paraphrase of his sayings is, “Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.”

John Wesley had given away more than \$200,000 by the time he died, his estate consisted of four silver spoons.

Reformer

- Literacy. He taught his lay preachers to read and study, and literacy was part of the Wesleyan covenant groups.
- He worked for decent wages and working conditions for miners, and for prison reform.
- Anti-slavery.
- Anti-rum, anti-gin. Gin became a curse when it was introduced in 1750. A woodcut by William Hogarth shows the damage of gin on British society. (Another woodcut shows the benefits of ale!) In this woodcut, the drunken mother lets her child fall to his death. Sores on her legs show that she has syphilis. In the upper right corner a dentist hangs himself because no one can afford to have their teeth worked on — they’re spending all their money on gin. Look closely for other terrible events in the picture. The production of cheap gin was promoted by the government as a way to use up excess grain. The sign over

the door is hard to read in the reproduction. It says, “drunk for a penny; dead-drunk for a tuppence; free straw.”

- Here is a link to the image:
<http://theatreoffashion.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/foundling-1-a.jpg>

John Wesley

John was master of six languages – English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, and French – he not only read everything he could get his hands on, but he also could and did preach in German and French when the occasion arose.

In addition, he was an independent thinker. (Remember that his father had originally been a “dissenter.”) John was one of the first to accept the value of the Benjamin Franklin’s experiments with electricity. He supported the idea of accommodation with science. In that view, Genesis 1-2 were allegories, not scientific descriptions of the beginning of the world.

A Role Model?

He was driven, perfectionistic, a force of nature, naive and socially inept. Are these the qualities we wish to emulate? Not so much — not so much the mental health, not so much the interpersonal skills. But his ideals are still worth claiming:

- passion and dedication
- openness to all
- love trumps dogma
- grace trumps sin

Next week: Wesleyan theology: stages of grace; the role of compassion and inclusiveness, and the dreaded Quadrilateral.