John Wesley in Context: his Century, Relationships and Spiritual Journey

Irv A. Brendlinger

George Fox University, ibrendli@georgefox.edu

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Many biographies have been written about John Wesley (1703–1791), so there is no need to plow the same ground again. However, for the purpose of this study, we shall briefly view him in the context of his age, note some relationships and revisit several formative experiences of his life which bear directly on his eventual interest in the problem of human bondage.

Spanning the eighteenth century, Wesley lived before the principles of sociology were understood and before the idea of Negro inferiority was propagated or generally accepted. He also experienced the societal transition brought about by the Industrial Revolution and witnessed the transformation of many in the lower and working classes as they adopted his values and discipline and worked their way into economic security.
He grew up in a home deeply committed to the Church of England. Both his father, an Anglican priest, and his mother had chosen the Church of England in their youth despite the fact that they came from staunch dissenting families. John Wesley considered himself a loyal Anglican for his entire life and viewed the explosion of Methodism as the bursting into flame of the coals of true Christianity within the established church. He did not consider himself to have separated from it.1

Committed to the life of the mind, he relished new experiences and learning opportunities throughout his life. He was awarded the baccalaureate degree in 1724 and the Master of Arts degree in 1727 from Oxford University. He studied for his B.A. at Christ Church, Oxford, and his M.A. at Lincoln College. He was elected Fellow of Lincoln College (1726), which most likely indicated ecclesiastical status.2 This brought pride to his father and satisfaction to himself. “Fellow of Lincoln College” is inscribed on his tombstone. He demonstrated his commitment to learning as he made innumerable resources available to his followers and as he continued to write throughout his life. It is not surprising that he took on the cause of the slave so late in life, when he learned of the need.

It was during his years as a Fellow at Lincoln College (from 1729) that he first associated with and eventually became the leader of the Holy Club. This group would become the relational nucleus of his experience in America and the community in which he established the patterns and discipline which so influenced the development of Methodism. Many years later he would reflect on the good of the Oxford years, “Let me be again an Oxford Methodist! I am often in doubt whether it would not be best for me to resume all my Oxford rules, great and small.”3 Community, discipline, service and learning were key factors in those years, and would facilitate his effectiveness for the rest of his life.

An important outgrowth of the Holy Club was Wesley’s involvement in compassionate ministries. In 1730 William Morgan, one of the original members of the Holy Club, began a number of charitable services to the needy. Wesley and the other members became deeply involved. In a literal response to the gospel mandate they “fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited those that are sick, and in prison.”4 With scheduled regularity they visited prisons, bringing spiritual solace and providing money for those imprisoned because of small debts. In addition to prison work, they assisted the poor with food, medicine, clothes, Bibles, and even helped tradesmen to procure materials and tools. They were motivated simply by what they read in Matthew 25:40: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”5 The needy, desperate and helpless prisoners so captured their compassion that by 1732 prison work filled the bulk of their time.

Such ministry, from the same biblical injunction, would be a dominant theme throughout Wesley’s life. Likewise, his response to the plight of the slave many years later is related to the sensitivity and compassion he developed during those early attempts to alleviate the suffering of the poverty stricken, the sick and especially those who were denied freedom, the prisoners.

The debt to Whitefield
The Holy Club was also the place where the important relationship between Wesley and George Whitefield began. While it was Charles Wesley that brought Whitefield into the Oxford group, the most lasting and intimate bond was forged between John Wesley and Whitefield. Near the end of the book I posit that the spread of Methodism created a climate that shaped the response of both lay people and politicians to the problem of slavery, and energized their efforts to end it. While Wesley’s role in the growth of Methodism is beyond question, in fairness, the role of George Whitefield must also be considered. This should be handled carefully because while Whitefield was very important to the spread of Methodism, his views on slavery were sometimes quite different from those of Wesley. That will be developed in a subsequent chapter, but the nature of Wesley’s and Whitefield’s relationship and the possible role Whitefield played regarding slavery will be mentioned briefly here.
The lives of Wesley and Whitefield interfaced on many levels. Each had a strong influence on the other and they played off each other for mutual benefit and development of ministry. Their relationship included mutual instruction, deep, affectionate support and disagreement.

Whitefield began open air preaching before Wesley and introduced the idea to him. At first Wesley was appalled, but he soon adopted and excelled in this method which came to be a hallmark of Methodism. Open air preaching was an effective means of reaching thousands who would not have entered a church building — but would eventually become thronging members of Methodism. Just as significant, Whitefield left the care of his converts to Wesley when he left England for his preaching tour in America. Wesley took the task seriously and organized the new Christians into groups that would experience support, learning and discipline. It is apparent that the seeds of Methodist organization, group dynamic, stability and success were sown in this process. This may well be one of the most important outcomes of the relationship between Wesley and Whitefield. It would certainly play a part in how ideas and values were transmitted, and how the masses were later organized to have a political impact.

The affectionate nature of this relationship is reflected poignantly in one particular experience. It was the encounter between the two men when Wesley learned that he had lost his true love, Grace Murray. Whitefield was with Wesley when the news came that Grace had married John Bennett at the insistence of John's brother. She did not communicate this to John, who was heartbroken by the news, and he fell into the arms of Whitefield and they sobbed together. While Charles' impulsive and controlling action could have caused an irreparable rift between John and Charles, and the resulting dissolution of Methodism, it is probable that Whitefield's gentleness, support and wisdom averted such a disaster. This occurred in 1749, when Methodism was just gaining momentum and would have been most vulnerable.

In spite of their affection, Whitefield and Wesley did not agree on everything. A major disagreement was over Whitefield's staunch position on predestination. While both Wesley and Whitefield had great evangelical success and considered themselves part of the same evangelical movement, Wesley feared that if Whitefield made the doctrine of predestination a public issue it would split Methodism. Societies were already being split as various leaders took sides on the issue. So, as their influence grew they both desired that the world should see their love and unity of spirit more than their theological differences. Agreeing that the primary message of the gospel was more important than a Calvinist or Arminian interpretation, the two men agreed that they would not emphasize or air their differing views publicly. After a temporary breach of that agreement, peace was restored and they decided to show the world the truth of their love and Christian unity by each committing to preach the funeral sermon of whoever died first. Years later Wesley did preach such a sermon for Whitefield.

The other disagreement between Wesley and Whitefield was over slavery. Both men spent time in Georgia and observed slavery first-hand. While Wesley's attitude toward slavery was consistent — unequivocally opposed — Whitefield's view changed from opposition to support. The contrast between Wesley and Whitefield will be developed later (chapter 3), however, in assessing the role of Methodism in ending slavery, the work of Whitefield must not be overlooked.

The success of Methodism was not due to Wesley alone. Whitefield contributed as well and attracted many converts. He, along with Wesley, was responsible for the evangelical move across England that made the populace fertile ground for antislavery ideals and action. It is even possible that Whitefield's early opposition to slavery (before 1751) was known by and influential among early Methodists, especially the followers of Wesley. Later these same followers took up Wesley's position and loyally supported the cause. It is impossible to confidently attribute such influence to Whitefield, but it would be less than honest to attribute the growth of Methodism, with its attitude of humanitarianism, singularly to Wesley without considering Whitefield's contribution.
Whitefield’s work was parallel to Wesley’s in promulgating Methodism, and ultimately in creating a social climate that was conducive to widespread support of the moral concern to end slavery. In addition, the combined evangelical influence of Whitefield and Wesley on William Wilberforce, through his Methodist aunt, must be acknowledged. Wesley and Whitefield were the primary factors in the massive evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century in England. That awakening was crucial to the development and success of the antislavery movement.

Commitment, self-awareness and a kindled heart
In addition to the education, compassionate ministries and the relationships mentioned already, three experiences stand out as particularly relevant to Wesley’s eventual involvement in the antislavery movement. They include the time surrounding his ordination as a deacon in 1725, his time in Georgia from 1736 to 1738, and his evangelical heart-warming at Aldersgate in 1738.

As Wesley was preparing for ordination as a deacon he read extensively. Two of the sources he explored were Jeremy Taylor’s Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying, and Thomas a’ Kempis’ Imitation of Christ. Somewhat later (late 1726 to early 1727) he read William Law’s Christian Perfection. It is impossible to overstate the importance of these sources for Wesley’s theology and ministry. After reading these works he committed himself to a radical kind of discipleship and became extremely disciplined in applying his religion to life. Some would term this time his “conversion,” or the beginning of his conversion. From the time that he first read them he would refer to the principles he learned in those books. They formed the foundation of his understanding of the full Christian experience — what some would call his doctrine of sanctification. This will be developed in chapter 3 but for now it is sufficient to mention that his grasp of the complete Christian experience embraced the love of and responsibility to others as well as to God, and this thinking was rooted in his reading of these devotional writers. Without this pivotal experience, and the deep commitment of 1725, the well known and celebrated experience of 1738 would not have occurred. He would have had no motive for going to America and subsequently would not have seen the Moravian demonstration of vital faith in the face of death. Nor would he have developed such a bond with the Moravians, which became so influential to his thinking.

America and self-awareness
In 1728 Wesley was ordained a priest. He served in parish ministry until he was called back to Oxford to fulfill his duties as a Fellow in residence. He remained in Oxford until he accepted the call to go to America. That call came through a series of persons and events. Wesley’s father was a friend of General James Oglethorpe who was settling the colony of Georgia, where the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) had established a ministry. Dr. John Burton, a tutor at Corpus Christi College encouraged Wesley to serve with the SPG. While the primary purpose of the SPG was typically ecclesiastical service to displaced Anglicans — not the evangelization of indigenous people — Wesley warmed to the call because it would afford him the opportunity to preach to Native Americans. Officially, he was filling the vacancy left by a Mr. Quincy, whose pastoral responsibilities were with the English settlers. Wesley would go to America accompanied by his brother Charles and other members of the Holy Club.

The time in America proved to be difficult but important for Wesley. On the personal side, he had a disappointing romance and experienced conflict with the local officials. In terms of ministry, he did his best in the ways he was accustomed. He was both diligent and consistent (some would say rigid), and the more independent colonists did not acquiesce to his style or requirements. In terms of new experiences, he was exposed to Native Americans, to slaves and to the cruelties of slavery. This was an important aspect of his time in America and he would never forget these impressions. He also saw firsthand what he later described as the results of human depravity: drunkenness, greed, debauchery and human brutality.
Although his brother Charles returned to England after only six months, John spent nearly two years in Georgia. While his work was not futile, he left America both depressed and discouraged. He had expected great success, but experienced the opposite. On the return voyage he confided in his journal, "I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me?" Back in London, his closing interviews with the Trustees of Georgia were anything but reassuring; they added salt to the wounds of an injured man. In short, he felt that he had failed, and that he was a failure vocationally and spiritually. Along with his experience of 1725, this would serve as preparation for his discovery in 1738.

Like a recurring refrain, without the humiliating experience of America it is highly unlikely that the well known and celebrated experience of 1738 would have followed.

Aldersgate and a kindled heart

Wesley, though in the depths of discouragement, found support and direction from some German Moravians — a group he had encountered on his initial voyage to America. In the Moravians, he witnessed for the first time a devout evangelical faith that embraced personal assurance of salvation and a clear sense of service. Back in London, unsure of both his spiritual condition and his calling, he sought the counsel of his Moravian friend, Peter Böhler. The insightful and encouraging words of Böhler are indicative of the help Wesley received at this crucial time. Wesley had asked if he should cease preaching because he did not feel he had authentic faith. Böhler advised, "Preach faith till you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." This counsel would prove to be prophetic.

Böhler and Wesley continued to dialogue. After several months of spiritual and vocational introspection, in May 1738, his spiritual “opening” came. Böhler insisted that it was possible to experience a living and dynamic personal faith and be fully assured of God’s free pardon of all sins. Wesley wondered if there were living witnesses to such an experience, and Böhler produced three the following day. Wesley was convinced and resolved to seek that assurance until he found it. Within five days his quest was satisfied. He had the spiritual awakening that is so frequently associated with him, and is often termed his “conversion.” His journal describes the events of the day beginning with readings from 2 Peter 1:4 and Mark 12:34 (“Thou art not far from the kingdom of God”), followed by an afternoon service at St. Paul’s where the anthem (based on Psalm 130:1-4,7-8) spoke to him, and finally attending a gathering of devout Moravian Christians in Nettleton Court, Aldersgate Street.

What happened that evening brought the personal, spiritual awareness he so longed for. At the meeting there was a reading from Luther’s preface to his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. In it Luther describes how faith prevents us from being charged with sin and transforms us so we can do what the law requires. It was a concise answer to all Wesley had been wrestling with regarding the penalty and the power of sin. In words that have become familiar, Wesley articulates his experience:

About a quarter before nine, while he [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Wesley’s italics reveal how deeply personal this moment was.

For many years both Wesley’s followers and scholars have debated exactly what this experience was. Many have taken the position that it was conclusively his “conversion,” before which Wesley was not really a Christian. This may be somewhat anachronistic, reading a late nineteenth and twentieth century evangelical (even fundamentalist) interpretation into Wesley’s experience. A number of facts temper that view. Nehemiah Curnock quotes Wesley in 1772 as saying to Charles regarding the Oxford years, “I did then walk closely with God, and redeemed the time. But what have I gained during these thirty years?” For another
example, many years later (1766) Wesley wrote Charles that he did not “love God,” “never did,” and never “believed in the Christian sense of the word.”¹⁸ Such a comment makes clear that different definitions are inferred for the same term at different times in his life. Being a “Christian” could mean being justified by God’s grace, which many can claim, or it could mean completely living up to all the values Christianity entails, which none can claim. Wesley himself differentiates between his experiences before and after Aldersgate with the terms, “faith of a servant” and “faith of a son,” but he acknowledges that he did have faith. He does not qualify that the former is inadequate for salvation, but leaves the role of judge to God, as he does with those who have never heard the gospel.

Perhaps the most telling perspective on this matter is presented by Reginald Ward, who lets Wesley’s literary treatment reveal whether or not Aldersgate is the most important aspect of Wesley’s life (as a unilateral “evangelical conversion” would imply). Ward states, “By keeping the *Journal* to within a few months of his death … Wesley reduced the conversion narrative to an insignificant proportion of a huge work running to a million words, of which the principle theme was his service to the Kingdom of God and the gathering of the Methodist people.”¹⁹ This statement modestly places Wesley’s Aldersgate experience in the larger context of his entire life.

Aldersgate is relevant to this study because it was crucial in Wesley’s life and clearly affected his later efforts against slavery. However, caution must be applied to avoid either overemphasizing or undervaluing Wesley’s Aldersgate experience. While it was important, it was not so important that it overshadowed the rest of Wesley’s life. It was certainly a turning point in his life and ministry but that truth can be maintained without having to conclusively define it.²⁰ The point is that the importance of Aldersgate is not dependent on how it is defined (conversion, awakening, heart warming), but in the fact that it contextualized former aspects of his journey and energized his ensuing ministry. That obedient ministry was, in Wesley’s thinking, the essence of Methodism — and obedience would push him to pursue social issues such as slavery. As Wesley describes, Aldersgate was the warming of his heart to the freeing, transforming gospel, and to an authentic, world-changing ministry that continued for the rest of his life. As such, the experience can stand on its own as a very significant spiritual encounter without having to be proscribed by a definition.

The major events of Wesley’s life come into focus when they are seen as parts of a spiritual tapestry. His approach to ordination in 1725 sowed the seeds of his dominant message, the love of God and neighbour (Christian perfection), and brought about the discipline and dogged determination that were so characteristic of him. Later, this was essential when he began to advocate for the slave. The discouragement of his two years in Georgia brought him to the realization that his own resources were limited. In this time he was brought to the end of himself and came face to face with the truth that he needed a greater source of energy than he could generate by himself. This was necessary for him and for the people he wanted to encourage (for example, William Wilberforce) when facing the incredible odds of popular opinion or the powerful West Indian lobby. Aldersgate opened his awareness to the intimate and personal relationship with God that empowered the commitment of 1725 and addressed the loneliness and alienation of the Georgia years. It opened the door to the kind of relationship with God that would give meaning and sustenance to the commitment he had made in 1725. It sustained him in difficult times and levelled him in good times.

These three pivotal experiences brought about a dynamic interaction of commitment, accurate self awareness and spiritual resources. They could well be termed a genuine Wesleyan synthesis — and without any one of them Wesley’s work would not have developed as it did. He certainly would not have embraced both the evangelical and social dimensions that made his work effective and relevant to the world of the eighteenth century and that continue to make it relevant in an ever changing world.

Out of the broader spiritual experience that includes his ordination, Georgia experience and Aldersgate, Wesley became
sensitized to the generally unacknowledged problem of slavery — and then was able to have a major impact on that problem. In this he stands apart from his contemporaries. He was the first major religious leader, known worldwide, to take a clear stand against slavery and thus have a distinctive influence on the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The substance and development of that argument form the content of this book.

We turn now to the specific engagement of John Wesley in the issue of slavery, beginning with a chronology of his antislavery journey.

For much of his life John Wesley was interested in the issue of slavery. At times he merely mentions items or events which caught his interest. At other times he becomes deeply involved. The chronology of his contact with slavery creates a setting from which to explore the development of his thought and the extent of his involvement. The following overview is relatively complete, although not exhaustive.

Wesley's first intellectual exposure to slavery seems to have occurred in 1726, when he was twenty-three years old. The year after his ordination as a deacon he read a play entitled *Oroonoko* by Thomas Southerne. The play was based on Aphra Behn’s novel, *Oroonoko*, the story of an African prince who started a slave rebellion after being kidnapped and sold into slavery.¹ Reflective of the time, both the book and the play focus on the unjust treatment of